A Journey toward Discernment at Beverly Hills Presbyterian Church

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This ministry focus paper entitled

A JOURNEY TOWARD DISCERNMENT IN THE LEADERSHIP OF BEVERLY HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Written by

ANDREW EAGLES

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary

upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:

Keith Matthews

Kurt Fredrickson

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A JOURNEY TOWARD DISCERNMENT IN THE LEADERSHIP OF
BEVERLY HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A DOCTORAL PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

ANDREW EAGLES
JUNE 2018
ABSTRACT

A Journey toward Discernment at Beverly Hills Presbyterian Church

Andrew Eagles
Doctor of Ministry
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2018

The purpose of this doctoral project is to develop a way for the leadership of Beverly Hills Presbyterian Church to address the complexity of its context through the practice of discernment. In particular, the project is designed to teach the leadership of the church to hear God’s voice personally and corporately. Through didactic teachings, the leadership will be provided a framework for understanding how God speaks. By equipping them with discernment practices, they will be empowered to practice and experience discernment both personally and corporately. Finally, these understandings and practices will be applied to decision-making and communication within the context of group leadership.

The first portion of this project seeks to explore the unique context of the church within the cities of Beverly Hills and Los Angeles. The history of the church and the ways it has been equipped to minister in its context are investigated. This project proposes that the growing diversity and complexity both within the church and its context call for discernment of God’s lead for the leadership of BHPC.

The second part of this project is a theological reflection on hearing God’s voice. It begins by exploring the leading ideas on discernment by exploring the prominent theological literature on the topic. It then explores the ways that discernment is either already present in the church or foundations are laid for its development. The difficulties associated with discernment are explored along with ways that these difficulties are mitigated.

The final part of this paper breaks down the ideological purpose of the project into practical steps. The information and development practices related to discernment are applied to the Deacon Board. This section explains the development of curriculum and modalities that create space for both individual and corporate discernment training. It explains the criteria and expectations for the pilot program as well as the resources needed. Finally, this section explains how this project will be continually and finally assessed.

Content Reader: Keith J. Matthews, DMin

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PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT
INTRODUCTION

Beverly Hills is a difficult context for ministry. Wealth and fame bind the city together despite its cultural diversity. The city’s secularism, materialism, and suspicion about Christianity contrast with the faith of Beverly Hills Presbyterian Church (hereafter, BHPC). This project focuses on the complexity of the church’s relationship with its context. It posits that the best way to minister in the midst of this complexity is to discern the voice of God.

The reach of this project is not limited to the church’s collective vision and decisions. Individually, the members and attenders of BHPC face increasingly complex decisions in their personal lives. No longer are default “Christian” tendencies and habits enough to lead to faithful choices. The increasingly post-Christian culture in Southern California and, more specifically, the non-Christian religious environment in Beverly Hills, leave reliance upon personal faith difficult for the congregation of BHPC.

It is hoped that this project will bring about an increased ability, expectation, and experience of discerning the way God speaks into the complex lives of congregants at BHPC. Tools will be developed that will collectively and individually empower faithful responses. This will enable members to move into confidence in relationship with Christ and to become part of what Christ is doing in the lives of those around them.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus encounters a young man who asks the way to eternal life. In response to Jesus’ answer, in Matthew 19:22, the “young man . . . went
away grieving, for he had many possessions.”¹ Jesus commented to his disciples that it is difficult for someone possessed by wealth to enter the kingdom of God. In many ways, this describes the difficult road of the gospel in Beverly Hills where wealth and fame capture the city.

The good news of this passage is found in Jesus’ answer to his disciples’ query in verses 25-26, “Who can be saved?” Jesus replied, “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.” The entire passage hangs upon this contrast between salvation being impossible for mortals and possible with God. While the young man was grieved at what he could not do, Jesus was aware of what God can do. The bridge between impossible and possible is learning to hear God speak.

In the past three years, the leadership at BHPC has experienced several instances where the competencies of the leaders and the status quo of the institution proved insufficient. The leadership and the broader church have bumped up against issues that required flexibility and wisdom beyond human capacity. In these stories are the seeds of the solution that this project attempts to explore and test.

In 2011, the lead pastor told the elders of his intentions to retire. Several elders reacted practically. They proposed that the associate pastor be moved into a co-pastor role and then succeed upon the retirement of the head of staff. The logic of this position was based upon the strength of the associate’s relationship with the church and the desire to avoid an interim period. Historical denominational wisdom had previously disallowed

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¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.
this. But in July of 2011, the Presbyterian Church (USA) (hereafter, PCUSA) implemented a new form of government that removed the denominational restrictions from this succession plan.

Immediately, the decision of leadership transition stepped outside of known competency and wisdom. The leadership entered a process designed to discern whether God was calling the associate pastor to be the next lead pastor at BHPC. The process would eventually be extended to the congregation of the church and ultimately to the Presbytery of the Pacific.

In 2014, the PCUSA amended the language of the Book of Order to allow for same-sex marriages. The question of same-sex marriage is divisive at BHPC. The issue split the elder board, split the church, and likely fragmented each person who wrestled with the complexity of the issue on theological, philosophical, political, and relational grounds. Again, the leadership found themselves in a position where their own competencies and the status quo of the church were insufficient. The desire to consider fully the integrity of the church’s witness and its pastoral sensitivity to all people placed the conversation on new ground. The church leaders sought to understand how God would have the church speak to a non-Christian culture and a divided congregation. They understood the need to be relationally present and graceful in disagreement, and they also began to discern their own motivations. In a moving moment, one of the elders spoke of the ways he had been taught early to respond with homophobia and hatred toward what

\footnotesize{PCUSA, \textit{The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Book of Order (Part II)} (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2009). G-14.0513 states, “The official relationship of an associate pastor to a church is not dependent upon that of a pastor, but an associate pastor is not eligible to be the next installed pastor in a church that they have served together, or to be called as a pastor to serve as co-pastor of that church.”}
he did not understand. He enunciated a desire not to allow that prejudice to hijack how he interacted with this moment theologically.

Again, the church leadership was in a position of discernment. They needed to understand their own motivations to make space to hear the heart of God on a contentious issue. They desired to hear from God how they should faithfully and graciously respond as leaders of BHPC.

Finally, in the summer of 2016, the retirement of a staff member rendered the church’s main missional outreach untenable. For thirty years, the church had hosted a meal for the hungry and homeless every Tuesday afternoon. The retirement of the director of this program forced the leadership to examine the feasibility of the outreach. In this discussion, there were loud voices that demanded a return to normalcy by continuing the meal. There were also equally fervent voices that called for its dissolution. The process politicized quickly. Although mistakes were made, the leadership of the church realized that the question was greater than either that of their competencies or the status quo. They decided to create a task force to pray, investigate, and discern with two questions in mind: Was God calling them to continue the meal? If not, what was the new focus of God’s call?

Each of these anecdotes began a process of discernment. In those processes, the leadership realized their discomfort in moving away from operating in areas of felt competency. But they also realized the need to hear God speak into the places of dissonance in the church. Discernment was a possible answer to the question of how BHPC could best engage in the midst of a rapidly changing context.
The purpose of this project is to develop the tools and empower the leadership of BHPC to discern the voice of God. Mark Branson and Juan Martinez, in their book, *Churches Culture and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities*, state, “There is no one plan for all congregations; rather the Holy Spirit instructs and empowers churches to pay attention to their own formation in their cultural contexts as they embody the gospel in a specific place.” Discernment is essential for BHPC and its members to embody the gospel in Beverly Hills and the greater Los Angeles area.

This doctoral project is organized in three parts. The first part, consisting of Chapter 1, provides description and analysis of the community and ministry context and explores the changing context of both. The second part, consisting of Chapters 2 and 3, theologically reflects upon the discernment of the movements of God. The third and final part, consisting of Chapters 4 and 5, identifies the practical outworking of this strategy within the leadership of BHPC.

Chapter 1 begins by providing detail and analysis of the city of Beverly Hills. Understanding the history of Beverly Hills is vital to grasping the context of the church’s identity with the community. The analysis of demographic and economic information shows the complexity of its cultural and economic diversity. This chapter touches on the iconic branding of the city to illuminate the unique mix of self and public perception.

The first chapter also introduces the story of BHPC. It narrates the early beginnings of a church inspired by a call to reflect a community diverse in its

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denominational creeds but uniform in its evangelical faith. It describes the life and growth of a church seeking to stay connected to the core values of the city and the tension as the city and church diverged. It also explores the growing diversity and gifts of the church that uniquely position it in Beverly Hills.

Chapter 2 begins the second part of the paper by providing a basis of understanding from multiple schools of thought on discernment. It examines the leading literature on the topic of discerning God’s voice. This chapter also explores literature that focuses on both individual and corporate discernment.

Chapter 3 presents a theological framework for understanding discernment. Particular attention is paid to the ways that BHPC is already involved in and is predisposed to discernment. This includes tools provided by the greater Christian Church, the PCUSA denomination, and BHPC’s history. Common practices of discernment such as the prayer of examen, *lectio divina* Bible study, Appreciative Inquiry, and dialogue are examined. An analysis of the obstacles to discernment also explores the ways those difficulties are practically mitigated within discernment.

The chapter then considers how discernment speaks the gospel into the complexity of the context of the church. Emphasis is placed upon discernment occurring with humility and gentleness in both self-understanding and relationship with those who differ. It fosters the expectation that the Holy Spirit directs the church to words and actions that match the needs of its diverse context. This empowers BHPC to move in its dual identities of saints in Jesus Christ and citizens of Beverly Hills and Los Angeles while maintaining a faithful witness in complexity.
The final part of this project focuses upon the practical outworking of discernment within the leadership of BHPC. Chapter 4 presents the vision for discernment as a response to the unique challenges and gospel opportunities in the church. The development of group discernment practices is based upon the development of individual discernment practice. As a result, parallel materials are created for the growth of personal and group discernment. This chapter describes the materials, the strategy for implementation, and potential proliferation of the study after the initial pilot project.

Chapter 5 describes the implementation process. Included are the origination of mixed media to provide space for varied learning styles and availability for individual discernment practices. This chapter also presents assessment strategies and development of leadership for the continuation of the project.

The appendix contains copies of all resources within this study. The hope is that these resources will continue to be used at BHPC as the practices learned in the pilot group are applied church wide. In addition, the materials will thus be available for any other church that is attempting to practice discernment to bridge its gospel identity into its citizenship in its context.

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CHAPTER 1
THE CONTEXT OF MINISTRY

God speaking is an incredible thing. It includes the humbling of the almighty, omnipresent, and timeless into a particular time, place, and vulnerability. As a result, context is part of God speaking while discernment is developing the discipline to hear. Since the premise of this project is that God speaks into the context of BHPC, this chapter begins with an exploration of the context of Beverly Hills. It then studies the story and demographics of the church.

Diversity Deep in the Demographics

Beverly Hills is a city located within the city of Los Angeles. Whereas Los Angeles is among the most diverse cities in the United States, Beverly Hills is predominantly wealthy and white; however, a demographic analysis reveals diversity within those generalizations. Beverly Hills is actually a multi-cultural city that has a minority Christian population.¹

Historically, Beverly Hills and the greater Los Angeles area were dominated by white Christians. It was “a bastion of Anglo Protestantism, reflecting the values of Midwestern parishioners who had been carried to the Southland on the Southern Pacific Railroad.”

According to most recent census data, Beverly Hills remains ethnically homogenous, with the city website reporting that over 89 percent of the city population is Caucasian. The next highest racial group is Asian at nearly 6 percent of the population.

A deeper look at the numbers reveals a richer cultural diversity. Over 38 percent of the residents of Beverly Hills are foreign-born with nearly a quarter of the city’s population comprised of people who were not United States citizens in 2000. Additionally, 44 percent of the city speaks a language other than English at home. Over a third, 37 percent, are “described as speaking English less than very well” and 46 percent of pupils in the Beverly Hills Unified School District speak “a first language other than English.”

These numbers suggest a cultural diversity that is not reflected in the broad ethnic categories of the census data based on skin color.

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5 U. S. Census Bureau, “QuickFacts: Beverly Hills city, California.”

Within its dominant Caucasian population, the strong Jewish population makes up the majority of the cultural diversity of the city. Jewish people have been a significant part of Beverly Hills since early in the city’s history. This is shown by the founding of the Reformed Jewish synagogue, Temple Emmanuel, in 1938, only twenty-four years after the city was incorporated and ten years after the founding of the first Christian church in the city. In 1960, the Jewish population of the city was 52.6 percent. More recent estimates place this percentage closer to 60 percent. Parallel statistics reveal Persian and Hebrew as two of the “most common non-English languages” spoken in the city, revealing the cultural diversity among the city’s Jewish population.

These statistics related to the Jewish population are culturally revealing but also provide an indication of the religious diversity in Beverly Hills. Further insight into the religious context of the city can be inferred by examining data from the greater Los Angeles County area. In Los Angeles County, 11.6 percent of the population identify with a variety of Protestant Christian churches, 36.1 percent identify with the Catholic Church, and 46.9 percent identify as “None.” In the ten years between 2000 and 2010, the “None” grouping became the fastest-growing religious demographic. These statistics

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suggest that the religious context of BHPC is diverse with a minority Christian population.

In addition to the cultural and religious diversity, the city’s reputation for wealthy residents is also nuanced. The neighborhoods directly around the church, north of Santa Monica Boulevard, are among the wealthiest in Los Angeles. In 2012, a consultant described the area as American Royalty due to the purchasing power of this population and to match the term used by Experian, a credit service and data collection company.11

But not all of Beverly Hills is wealthy. In addition to a building presently subsidized by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, apartment complexes and condos on the south side of the city temper income statistics. The census data reports the median household income in 2015 dollars as $97,327.12 A Los Angeles Times article from 2014 places this statistic higher at $193,000 per year, but claims those “rarefied statistics mask a more complicated reality,” where the less wealthy residents of the city hide the fact that the “richest fifth of Beverly Hills households make an average of nearly $661,000.”13 These statistics place the average household income in the city of Beverly Hills at 1.5 to 3.1 times higher than the statewide average, with the richest fifth making 10.7 times the statewide average.14


12 U. S. Census Bureau, “QuickFacts: Beverly Hills city, California.”


Examining housing costs provides another way to assess the wealth of Beverly Hills. Housing statistics present a partial, if imperfect, asset-based assessment of residents while also giving an indication of the cost to live within the city. The median value of owner-occupied housing units in Beverly Hills is $1,727,600,\textsuperscript{15} which is nearly 4.5 times the statewide average\textsuperscript{16} and 9.7 times the national average.\textsuperscript{17} Similarly, rents are more than 1.5 times the statewide average\textsuperscript{18} and more than twice the national average.\textsuperscript{19}

Both the cost and income figures paint a picture of Beverly Hills as both a wealthy and an expensive city. But as revealing as these figures are, they give an incomplete picture of the role wealth plays in Beverly Hills. In order to understand the context of BHPC, it is necessary to examine the city’s iconic branding and history.

**Beverly Hills: That’s Where We Want to Be**

The popular music band Weezer wrote a song in 2005 entitled, “Beverly Hills.” The chorus echoed a popular cultural commentary on the city. It stated, “Beverly Hills, that’s where I want to be.” These lyrics reflect a carefully cultivated branding of the city. The image was also reflected in the 1960s in the popular situational comedy, “The Beverly Hillbillies,” and in the 1990s teen drama, “Beverly Hills 90210.” In each of these

\textsuperscript{15} U. S. Census Bureau, “QuickFacts: Beverly Hills city, California.”

\textsuperscript{16} U. S. Census Bureau, “QuickFacts: California.”


\textsuperscript{18} U. S. Census Bureau, “QuickFacts: California.”

\textsuperscript{19} U. S. Census Bureau, “QuickFacts: United States.”
popular culture renderings, Beverly Hills is depicted as an exclusive destination community defined by its wealth, fame, and sophistication.

The area that is now Beverly Hills was initially purchased by investors hoping to discover oil in the land outside of Los Angeles. Instead of oil, water was discovered and the Rodeo Land and Water Company was set up in 1906 with the intention of creating an exclusive residential community. Marc Wanamaker’s history of Beverly Hills, Images of America: Early Beverly Hills, notes, “The new corporation was dedicated to develop a residential town with broad tree-lined streets, spacious lots, and generous parks.”  

Not only is Beverly Hills an exclusive and wealthy enclave near Los Angeles by design, it has been marketed this way from its beginning. Wanamaker, in Images of America: Beverly Hills 1930-2005, notes, “A 1921 Beverly Hills Real Estate brochure proclaimed the Rodeo Land and Water Company’s motto as an ‘exclusive residential district in the foothills between Los Angeles and the Sea.’”

The city’s reputation was solidified in the 1920s when it became the residence of movie stars like Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Will Rogers, and Charlie Chaplin. Not only was Beverly Hills a community where its wealthy residents lived, played, and shopped, it became a town with a national and international reputation.

That reputation persists to this day. In addition to being a residential destination, tourists come to shop the high-end stores, dine at high-end restaurants, and view the

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22 Wanamaker, Images of America: Early Beverly Hills, 103.
homes of celebrity citizens, past and present, in Beverly Hills. A popular travel guide
depicts the city as delivering “wealth and excess on a dramatic, cinematic scale.”
Another says, “Since the early 1920s it has been the entertainment industry’s favorite
residential address. [The] Beverly Hills Golden Triangle is the West Coast’s answer to
New York’s Madison Avenue, with its array of restaurants, shops, and coffee bars.”

Part of the story of Beverly Hills is the uneasy relationship between the
community and its branding. On one hand, the area’s iconic reputation is carefully
cultivated. On the other hand, it creates difficulty for the places in which the community
does not mirror its popular image. Additionally, the image and its ramifications create
tension for those who live and work in Beverly Hills. That tension is noted in another
popular travel guide that admits that “it’s not all glitz and glamour; the healthy mix of
filthy rich, wannabes, and tourists that comprises downtown Beverly Hills creates a
unique—and often snobby surreal—atmosphere.” The long-running reality of this
tension is illustrated in a 1929 proposal by the wealthy in the community to build a wall
around the town to keep visitors out. The proposal was only defeated when they realized
that these outsiders and tourists are good for shops and restaurants in town.

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23 Anabella Brown and Linda Cabasin, eds., Fodor's Travel 2016 (New York: Fodor’s Travel,
2016), 195.

24 Claire Sullivan, Slaney Begley, Joanne Leveque, and Zoe Ross, eds, Eyewitness Travel:

25 Matthew Poole, et al., Frommer's California, 23rd ed (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013),
548.

26 Walter Wagner, Beverly Hills: Inside the Golden Ghetto (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1976),
29.
In 1979, global political realities introduced a new tension to Beverly Hills. The Islamic Revolution deposed Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, and an Islamic Republic under the Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was established. The religious principles of the new regime changed the political fortunes of Iranian Jews, causing large numbers to flee Iran and immigrate to Israel, New York, and Beverly Hills.

In his article on this Elite Iranian Jewish Community of Beverly Hills, Kevin West writes, “Although dispossessed, the thousands of Iranian Jews who flocked to Beverly Hills . . . had assets most immigrants lack: advanced education, business experience, and, in the majority of cases, some cash in overseas accounts.”

Iranian Jewish immigrants moved into the homes and businesses of Beverly Hills. The influx of wealth from Iran rippled through a town that had already prided itself on its wealth and exclusivity. Anecdotes about the wealth included a well-traveled tale of a new immigrant ringing the doorbell at a Beverly Hills mansion, asking the price of the home, then “opening dollar-stuffed suitcases to pay the entire cost in cash.”

While the immigrants from Iran fit easily into the religious and financial expectations of Beverly Hills, other aspects of the population shift clashed with expectations of others already in the town. Racial and cultural tensions were evident in such diverse places as the city’s synagogue, high school, and politics. The newer Persian community tended to be culturally insular. “Entire neighborhoods of Tehran’s Jewish

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elite settled in Beverly Hills—something like a whole transplant of a social community.”29 As a result, instead of the newcomers taking on the iconic branding of the city, the city began to change. West writes, “Today so many Persians own stakes in Beverly Hills’ Golden Triangle, the prime streets between Wilshire and Santa Monica boulevards, that the area is known to some as ‘Tehrangeles.’”30

This movement toward a greater (or different) cultural diversity in Beverly Hills is larger than the Persian immigration. This shift is reflected in the city’s public school system. An article published in 2006 addressed the cultural diversity in the city’s high school by reporting that while 40 percent of the students at Beverly Hills High are Iranian Americans, there are “57 nationalities represented and 27 languages besides English spoken at home.”31

Beverly Hills has characteristics that have been carefully nurtured and consistently held throughout the life of the city. It is a city that is intentionally aware of wealth, fame, and sophistication. The marketing of the Beverly Hills lifestyle has been both a conscious and a subconscious aspect of the city’s identity and branding. Even so, the practical outworking of this has been culturally shifting and diversifying.

The city’s unchanging wealth, fame, sophistication, and increasing cultural and religious diversity all play a significant role in the context of ministry for BHPC. It impacts the discipleship of members of the church as they navigate their individual place

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29 West, "A Look inside the Elite Iranian Jewish Community of Beverly Hills."

30 Ibid.

within the church and the city. It also has a bearing upon the mission of the church to the surrounding neighborhood and city. The complexity of these relationships is the reason for this project’s call upon the leadership of BHPC to discern the leading of God in the particularity of Beverly Hills.

**How a Church Came to Be on Rodeo Drive**

The first Christian organization in the city of Beverly Hills was a Sunday school class held above a butcher shop in 1910. By 1913, new accommodations were found for the growing fellowship above the Woods-Beekman Store. By 1921, with the population of the community nearing one thousand people, a more formal church was sought. A survey by the Interdenominational Council of Superintendents of Southern California revealed that more local citizens identified as Presbyterians than any other creed. BHPC was formally instituted in August 1921 as a community church for members of all evangelical creeds.

The Rodeo Land & Water Company donated the site of the present church on the corner of Rodeo Drive and Santa Monica Boulevard. The church is located geographically at the heart of the city, blocks from city hall and at the north end of the iconic shopping district on Rodeo Drive. Though originally chartered to twenty-two members from various denominations, construction on a church building that seated five hundred people was completed in 1926. The size of the sanctuary announced the

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intention of the church to serve the growing community of Beverly Hills for years to come.

In many ways, the church paralleled the development of the community of Beverly Hills. An early history of the church, produced in 1946, detailed a church busy with establishment of men’s and women’s clubs, youth gatherings, capital campaigns, and fundraising drives. The choir was broadcast over the radio shortly after the church building was completed.

BHPC mirrored the community’s infatuation with fame and wealth. Great acclaim was given to the fact that television producer Ralph Edwards was an elder. Edwards would produce an episode of his hit television show, “This Is Your Life,” that accounted for the first forty years of the church. Margaret Hamilton founded the Beverly Hills Presbyterian Preschool after her iconic role as the Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*. Similarly, James Stewart and Greer Garson were long-time members. In 1987, James Stewart hosted “A Beverly Hills Christmas with James Stewart” that featured the Christmas program at BHPC and other local celebrities on national television.³⁴

Even as it nurtured its image as a church that reflected the city of Beverly Hills, the difficulties of this ministry model were becoming apparent. It was noted in the publication produced to celebrate the church’s fiftieth year in 1971, “Recent Sessions and present Elders have had to sail in strange waters. They have seen resounding changes in people, in the City, the Nation, and in forms of worship. They find that a form of congregation built to small community specifications with the family unit as center, has

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to change to survive the 1970s in a megalopolis with its complex relationships.”

These difficulties soon caught up to BHPC and neighboring Beverly Vista Presbyterian Church, founded on the south side of the city. In 1972, the two congregations merged in response to flagging attendance. During the merger, one of the pastors put it “into succinct perspective. ‘There wasn’t room for two churches.’”

The merger created its own difficulties as the wealthier members from the northern congregation struggled to accept the less wealthy members of the amalgamated southern congregation. The newly combined church would continue to struggle. In 1994, a consultant’s report noted that “concerns about lethargy, a decline in church membership, recognition of the changing nature of the community, fiscal uncertainty, and the desire for a thorough examination of the congregation’s vision emerged.”

BHPC had the reputation of being a “country club church.” The 1994 consultant report noted that its membership was “predominantly white (with several people of color now present), well-educated, and theologically inquiring.” Despite the reputation of Beverly Hills, the church was not wealthy. The budget was consistently underwritten from the church’s endowment due to low giving and low attendance. In a city known for its wealth and growing cultural diversity, BHPC did not reflect its context in either way.

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36 Wagner, Beverly Hills: Inside the Golden Ghetto, 78.


38 Ibid.
In 2007, the church moved to address the growing population in Beverly Hills that identify culturally and linguistically with Iran. The Iranian Church of Los Angeles, which holds services in Farsi, began to nest on the campus with worship services in the early afternoon on Sundays. This move had two effects upon BHPC. It was a positive move toward connecting with and addressing the cultural trends within its context. It also had the effect of “requiring the church to deal regularly with change due to cultural differences and permutations.”\(^{39}\) In many ways, the church was beginning to step more firmly into the struggles of ministry and relationship in the complexity of its context.

On June 17, 2012, then lead pastor, Rev. Dr. David Worth addressed the international nature of both the church and the surrounding city. He said, “We are an international congregation. I don’t think we fully understand what that means. . . . How many people might come if they realized that we are an international community?”\(^{40}\) In addition to the relationship with the Persian congregation, Dr. Worth was highlighting a natural growth occurrence within the life of the church. The ethnic and cultural diversity of the surrounding city had begun to be reflected in the traditionally Anglo, monocultural congregation. He wondered aloud what might happen if BHPC were purposefully to embrace this diversity in its practical operations and missional outreach.

The demographics of the church support Dr. Worth’s statement. In 2016, over thirty different nationalities were present within the congregation of BHPC. This diversity is celebrated annually on World Communion Sunday with an International


\(^{40}\) David Worth, “Lessons Learned” (sermon preached at BHPC, Beverly Hills, California, June 17, 2012).
Luncheon, where members bring food to a church potluck and wear clothing that represents their cultural heritage. While still predominantly white, one quarter of the church’s membership is a mix of Asian, African, African-American, and Middle Eastern.

Despite the growing cultural variety within the congregation of the church, it has struggled to embrace its diversity. This presence has not shifted the dominant cultural voice in the church leadership and staff. The ethnic minorities that are present tend to be consonant adapters “who have adapted almost completely to the dominant culture” or selective adapters “who adapt to parts of the dominant culture but reject other elements.” As a result, the dominant cultural voice of the church has not been forced to accommodate the multicultural reality of the church.

Conclusion

Despite being located at the heart of Beverly Hills historically and geographically, BHPC has struggled to connect with the city for decades. The church finds itself differentiated from its context religiously, economically, and culturally. The internal intricacies of wealth and cultural diversity add another significant layer of complexity for ministry. These contextual realities call for a new way to engage both the church’s Christian faith and its context.

This project explores the ways that practices of discernment can empower the leaders of BHPC to effectively minister in the complexity of Beverly Hills. It seeks to inspire the church to extend beyond its historical competencies and to seek the lead of the

Holy Spirit. Discernment of God’s voice will anchor church members in their identity with Christ both individually and corporately for years to come.
PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW: WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT THE VOICE OF GOD

One of the foundational assumptions in this project is that God communicates or speaks with his people. This chapter explores how this communication occurs. Closely correlated to the “how” of God’s speaking is the question of discernment or how God’s communication is heard or perceived, understood, and applied.

There is not a single answer to the question of how God speaks and how people hear. The diversity of experience is reflected in the breadth of the literature on the topic. In an attempt to engage the broad spectrum of perspectives, this chapter begins by comparing four authors—Gary Friesen, Dallas Willard, Richard Peace, and Thomas Dubay—who highlight different aspects of God’s communication with individuals. Understanding the spectrum of perspectives is important for two reasons. First, it provides a basis for more particularized discussion in the following chapter where theological foundations for the development of discernment at BHPC are explored. Second, it recognizes that God speaks in a myriad of ways. W. A. M. Peters, in the article, “Ignatius of Loyola and ‘Discernment of Spirit,’” refers to discernment as an art
where “one should be very cautious about methods, techniques, and so on.” It is important to provide the leaders at BHPC with a broad understanding that will allow space for their experiences, personalities, and understandings to be developed in the art of discernment as opposed to creating a single methodology to adopt.

Personal discernment provides the foundation for the practical application of this project. The leadership of BHPC needs to discover how individually hearing God communicate or speak translates into corporate discernment. Thus, this chapter ends by exploring the work of Ruth Haley Barton, who transitions the works on individual discernment into group settings.

In his article, “Discerning Spiritual Discernment: Assessing Current Approaches for Understanding God’s Will,” Dennis Horton offers a helpful organization of the literature on personal discernment. Drawing largely from Garry Friesen’s *Decision Making and the Will of God*, he identifies three streams of thought: the Traditional View, the Wisdom Approach, and the Relationship Formation Approach. The Traditional View and the Wisdom Approach are introduced in this chapter’s examination of Friesen’s work. The Relationship Formation Approach is explored in greater detail in the works of Willard, Peace, and Dubay. This third approach allows for aspects of the first two streams with an emphasis upon “intimate relationship with God,” “formation in Christ,” and “free

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decisions born out of a deep and maturing relationship with Christ.”2 The three authors explored within this synthesis approach each bring a distinct emphasis worth exploring.

**Decision Making & the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View, by Garry Friesen**

Gary Friesen’s work identifies the first two major approaches to spiritual discernment. The approach that Friesen characterizes as the “Traditional View” springs from the premise that “for each of our decisions God has a perfect plan or will.”3 He dedicates the opening chapters of his book to presenting and critiquing this approach.

The heart of his critique of the Traditional View is that it is based upon a flawed premise. Friesen differentiates between the sovereign will of God, the moral will of God, and God’s particular will for each individual. “My contention is that the individual will of God for every detail of a person’s life is not found in Scripture,”4 he writes. The Traditional View creates a gap between people’s expectation that God will reveal an individual will for their lives and the reality that such a will does not exist. Christians who maintain the Traditional View search in vain for communication from God about guidance that God does not provide. As a result, Friesen writes, many Christians “fear that they have missed God’s individual (specific) will. In the absence of clear leading,

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4 Ibid., 41.
they went ahead and made a choice. Now they feel guilty because they aren’t certain they have done what God wants them to do.”

Friesen continues his critique by undercutting two experiential means of discernment. Adherents of the Traditional View point to subjective impressions given into their thoughts, emotions, or experiences as “direct revelation (God’s verbal communication to the individual).” Additionally, the experience of the peace of God is often used as an experiential litmus test for rightly discerning God’s communication and will. The presence of peace is considered to be a clear determinate that a person is in the center of God’s individual will. Alternately, the lack of peace is a strong indication that a person is not. Friesen refutes both of these impressions on their “inherent subjectivity.” He writes, “Impressions are real; believers experience them. But impressions are not authoritative. They do not constitute the authoritative voice of the Spirit. They may be useful in pointing the way to wisdom, but on the issue of authority, impressions are just impressions.”

In place of the Traditional View, Friesen proposes the “Way of Wisdom.” Instead of looking to direct revelation in regard to individual decision-making in life, the Christian can expect God to provide guidance through wisdom. He explains, “God mediates his wisdom to us through His Word, our personal research, wise counselors, and

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5 Ibid., 145.
6 Ibid., 91.
7 Ibid., 108.
8 Ibid., 93.
applied lessons in life.” The emphasis in Christian obedience is thus properly shifted from seeking revelation of God’s will for individual lives to seeking wisdom in regard to God’s will revealed in Scripture, community, spiritual gifting, and experiences.

A core component of the Way of Wisdom is freedom. In affirmation of the ways that God creates, forms, and empowers human beings, they are given freedom to make decisions in life. This freedom is to be exercised within the boundaries of direct Scriptural command and the wisdom the believer develops in relationship with God. Friesen writes, “Within boundaries prescribed by God’s own character, humans analyze, evaluate, judge, and freely determine their choices. No other creature but man was given the competence to make free judgments.”

Despite his skepticism concerning direct revelation, Friesen provides room for special revelation. In response to Scriptural precedent, he contends that this is possible, albeit not to be expected. He writes, “God’s guidance through His Scriptures and wisdom is normally fully sufficient. If more is ever needed for guiding the believer, he will take the initiative and give further direct miraculous guidance.” Even so, he states that believers must know the limits of special revelation. It is not to be equated with Scripture. It is not to be expected by every believer. The Scriptural examples are for “people selected by God to play a major role in His plan.”

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9 Ibid., 183.
10 Ibid., 41.
11 Ibid., 235.
12 Ibid., 237.
13 Ibid., 47.
Friesen’s work is an important contribution to this project’s exploration of God’s speaking to BHPC. He highlights the danger of spiritual abuse and shame that can be part of attempts to discern God’s direct communication. He also adds the important elements of freedom and wisdom to the exploration. Rather than direct communication, God often equips people to discern what is best through the ways that God has gifted them with wisdom, experience, and intelligence.

Even so, Friesen narrows the avenues for discernment too much. In his attempts to create space where direct communication from God is lacking and to prevent potential abuse, Friesen fails to account for experiences of Christians who believe they have heard God speak. Author Larry Warner contends that Friesen’s perspective over-rotates on its insistence on removing “the mystical, supernatural, and transcendent components of Christian discernment.” In order to provide a broader examination of the ways God speaks, this chapter also examines several works that attempt to build upon Friesen’s correctives while remaining open to ways that God communicates more directly.

_Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God, by Dallas Willard_

Dallas Willard’s book, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*, is the primary work that takes Friesen’s critiques into account while exploring God’s speaking to people in direct communication. Willard’s thesis is that hearing God communicate directly is a part of being in relationship with God. The problem is that too many Christians lack the framework of thought and language to be able to recognize the

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experience of hearing. In essence, God speaks but many do not have the language to categorize their experiences or the maturity to understand how communication with God works.\textsuperscript{15} *Hearing God* attempts to give both an intellectual basis of understanding and practical help for hearing God speak.

Willard is quick to recognize and account for Friesen’s critiques of direct communication from God. He mitigates these critiques by contending that a mature relationship with God provides both the context of hearing God communicate directly and the foundation for discernment. Willard writes, “Hearing God cannot be a reliable and intelligible fact of life except when we see his speaking as one aspect of his presence with us, of his life in us. Only our communion with God provides the appropriate context for communications between us and him.”\textsuperscript{16} It is this communion that provides a person with the ability to discern and resist spiritual abuses that can accompany false claims of hearing God speak.\textsuperscript{17} This relationship also provides the confidence and room for freedom and wisdom to be part of the choices of life when there is no direct communication from God. Willard writes, “Generally we are in God’s will whenever we are leading the kind of life he wants for us. And that leaves a lot of room for initiative on our part, which is essential: our individual initiatives are central to his will for us.”\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 42.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 15.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 13.
From this point on, Willard’s departure from Friesen is severe. He posits an intimacy where God communicates more directly and personally than Friesen countenances. He contends that “people are meant to live in ongoing conversation with God, speaking and being spoken to.” What develops from this conversational relationship is an intimacy that allows the Christian to know God, be guided by God, and to hear God’s voice. The resulting relationship takes the uniqueness of the individual into account while moving in spiritual formation toward union with God. Willard writes, “In the progress of God’s redemptive work communication advances into communion, and communion into union.”

With relationship as the basis and goal of hearing from God, Willard develops a thorough understanding of how God communicates and how we can recognize that communication. He acknowledges that Christians are often connected in relationship with God through ways other than speaking. He briefly addresses blind faith, a sense of God’s presence, and knowing God’s empowering in work and circumstances. But the primary focus of *Hearing God* is upon knowing God’s will through speaking to people.

The power of God speaking to people is understood on two levels. On one level, there is a sense of communication that results in both a greater understanding of and communion with God. On another level, God speaking releases God’s power. God’s word spoken to people holds the power of God for creation, sovereignty, and

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19 Ibid., 20.
20 Ibid., 68, location 1057.
21 Ibid., 201, location 3379.
22 Ibid., 67, location 1031.
redemption. In this, Willard displays a high view of God’s word and its power in Creation. But he does not limit this to Scripture. Rather, Willard understands Scripture as an example of God speaking “preserved in written form.” Thus, the Bible is an affirmation that God speaks to people. Willard is careful to assert that God’s speaking in Scripture and his speaking directly to people are not of equal importance. But even with the primacy of Scripture, God does speak directly to people. And in this direct communication is the power of God toward transformation, empowerment, and guidance.

The heart of Willard’s practical teaching is found in his explanation of the still, small voice of God and his instruction on how to discern when this voice is from God. Willard contends that “a major point of this book is that the still, small voice – or the interior or inner voice, as it is also called – is the preferred and most valuable form of individual communication for God’s purposes.” The still small voice of God parallels God’s relationship with an individual in its balance and intimacy. In the same way that the uniqueness of the individual is not overwhelmed in relationship with the greater personality of God, the still small voice is a subtle communication that does not overwhelm the hearer. Rather, it bears the “stamp of [God’s] personality” in the “form of thoughts that are our thoughts, though these thoughts are not from us.” The hearer receives the still small voice of God unobtrusively but in a manner that is recognizable to a person in relationship with God.

23 Ibid., 156, location 2586.
24 Ibid., 69, location 1069.
25 Ibid., 118, location 1917.
26 Ibid., 115, location 1872.
Willard’s hypothesis is that many Christians hear the still small voice but do not know how to discern this direct communication from God. The key to discernment is two-fold. First, the hearers must put themselves in a position to hear the voice of God. The ability to hear the voice of God can be frustrated by lifestyles of disobedience, a lack of openness and expectation, and disbelief.

Second, a person develops the ability to recognize and discern the still small voice of God through experience. This is necessary because there are voices that are not from God that can be mistaken for God speaking. Willard contends that a person can begin to recognize God’s voice over time within the context of relationship with God. Willard writes that “God’s voice in our heart is a certain weight or force, a certain spirit, and a certain content in the thoughts that come in God’s communications to us. These three things in combination mark the voice of God.” The still small voice carries a weight or sense of importance that stands out to the hearer. It holds a character or spirit that is recognizable. Also, the content of the voice will resonate with what we know of God from Scripture. In this way, a person can both hear the voice of God and learn to recognize it. As the experience of discerning God’s voice is gained, the hearer deepens in relationship with God.

27 Ibid., 91, location 1453.
28 Ibid., 93, location 1488.
29 Ibid., 86, location 1352.
30 Ibid., 218, location 3685.
31 Ibid., 235, location 3996.
In *Hearing God*, Dallas Willard establishes the importance of God speaking to people. The purpose of hearing God is not to discover God’s individual plan for the life of the hearer. Rather it is to develop intimacy with the God who desires communion and union with people. Hearing God is part of how God has created us to be in relationship with God. Willard goes a great distance in giving intellectual credibility to the role of discernment in Christian life and relationship with God.

Despite the rational and practical foundation that *Hearing God* provides, it purposefully remains narrow in focus. Willard concentrates upon a sense of God speaking through the still small voice. He does not fully address hearing God speak outside of the individual relationship with God.

**Noticing God, by Richard Peace**

In Richard Peace’s book, *Noticing God*, the ways that God communicates with us is expanded beyond the wisdom of Friesen or the still small voice that is Willard’s focus. Instead, he redefines “hearing God” based upon the experience of God’s presence. Peace writes, “It is mostly the presence of God we encounter and not the voice of God we hear. This is an important distinction. We talk about ‘hearing God’ but this hearing has got to be understood in the broadest sense. This usually means touching the presence of God. Very occasionally, in touching this sense of presence, it involves some form of communication.”

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Peace develops what he calls the “spiritual discipline of noticing God.”33 His thesis is that God is present throughout life, but people need to practice noticing. He systematically offers rational and practical framework for meeting God in places such as mystical encounters, the ordinariness of everyday life, in church, in creation, culture, community, and Scripture. But this list is not meant to be exhaustive as much as illuminating. The commonality is that God makes Godself available to people in a variety of ways. Peace notes that the variety is bounded only by the uniqueness of people. He writes, “I suspect that God addresses each of us in ways that are unique to us.”34

Redefining God’s direct communication – from Willard’s focus upon the still, small voice to Peace’s focus on noticing the presence of God – changes discernment. Where thoughts and impressions seem predisposed for guidance and understanding, this is not necessarily true when one is noticing God’s presence. Peace recognizes this and differentiates the discernment task. He writes, “There are really two issues here: discerning God's presence and discerning God's voice. Discerning God's presence is what I mean by noticing God in this world. Learning to live in a God-filled universe brings hope, joy, courage, and much else to our life. Discerning God's voice has to do with choices we make: what (if anything) does God have to say about those decisions.”35

This is not to say that noticing God’s presence does not play a part in the discernment of vision, direction, or discernment in life. Noticing the presence of God

33 Ibid., 14.
34 Ibid., 59.
35 Ibid., 140.
gives people an opportunity to respond to what they have experienced, leading to spiritual formation and deeper relationship with the God encountered. In this way, hearing God in the practice of God’s presence will affect how a person moves in wisdom or receives direct communication from God.

*Noticing God* expands upon the works of Friesen and Willard to create space for the variety and pervasiveness of God’s communication. It implicitly provides insight into ways that God directly and relationally develops people that ultimately impacts how they move in wisdom or hear God’s still, small voice. Even so, Peace fails to directly explain how experiences of the Presence of God affect a person’s understanding or application to daily life.

**Authenticity, by Thomas Dubay**

Thomas Dubay’s book, *Authenticity*, adds two elements to the present discussion. It brings a focus on hearing or discernment that is broader than the narrow focus of either Willard or Friesen and is more complete than Peace’s view. Dubay also writes from the perspective of the Catholic Church and thus considers the space of communal discernment by addressing the role of the ecclesial church in discerning the voice of God.

The focus of Dubay’s work is upon the way that a person discerns or hears rather than upon how God speaks. The inspiration for the title of the work is that authenticity is the necessary state of a person who is able to hear God speak. The need for authenticity springs from the reality that when God speaks he speaks to imperfect human beings.

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36 Ibid., 150-151.

Thus, no matter how clearly spoken, the words of God may be adulterated by the ways people receive and interpret them.\textsuperscript{38} Authenticity allows the hearer to discern between what God speaks and how the hearer impacts the experience.

The process of discernment necessitates two foci for those who hear God communicate. On one hand, there is need for the hearer to be self-aware. Otherwise, the danger is that the communication from God will become scrambled in the inner turbulence of the recipient. Dubay writes, “discernment includes both detecting the origin of our inclinations, desires, inspirations and insights and evaluating the signs by which one might know if a given course of action or teaching seems to be of God or not. The two meanings are closely intertwined.”\textsuperscript{39} On the other hand, the potential hearer is helped by the development of characteristics of authenticity that prepare for right discernment. Dubay notes, “Detachment, inner freedom, absence of illusory desires are a condition for detecting the gentle inspirations of the Spirit of Jesus.”\textsuperscript{40} In each of these foci, Dubay’s preoccupation is with rightly discerning God’s direct communication.

In addition to his focus upon the authenticity of the hearer, \textit{Authenticity} consistently appeals away from the individualism inherent in each of the previous works. Part of the discernment process for the hearer includes the corporate body of Christ. For Dubay, this means the Catholic Church. God’s direct communication to an individual or “private revelation” must be held in submission to the “public” teachings of the Church.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 80.
The historical and hierarchical witness of the Church is a means of testing and offsetting the potential problems in hearing God speak.

In *Authenticity*, Dubay recognizes the breadth of how God speaks to individuals. He places necessary emphasis on the potential danger in how people receive and share direct communication from God. He asserts that this danger is mitigated primarily through authentic self-awareness and submission to the Catholic Church. To the Protestant, the difficulty with this work is the lack of a corporate magisterium to anchor discernment.

*Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry*, by Ruth Haley Barton

In her work, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry*, Ruth Haley Barton addresses corporate discernment where there is not a defined structure of submission like the Catholic Church. She bridges individual discernment to corporate discernment. In part, the book is a practical and theoretical manual on corporate discernment. It is also the story of the life of the Transforming Center, a spiritual formation ministry. Together, they provide a roadmap for moving a leadership team into practices of discernment. Barton writes, “This book is designed to be a one-stop-shop guide for leadership groups who wish to become a community for discernment.”42

Barton recognizes that corporate discernment begins with individual discernment. Group discernment is not likely where members of the group are not personally

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practicing discernment. She defines discernment as the “capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and activity of God.” To be able to recognize and respond to God’s presence and lead within a corporate group depends upon spiritual formation and discernment experience developed on a personal level by each member of the group. The group does not serve the role of hierarchical affirmation as in Authenticity. Instead, the corporate process becomes part of the discernment process where refining happens to the community and to individuals that allows for discernment, transformation, and spiritual formation.

Corporate discernment both adds to and multiplies the difficulties experienced in personal discernment. Difficulties are multiplied because all persons involved in the group bring their own inauthenticity to the process. Barton writes, “Individuals not engaged in regular spiritual practices will engage the leadership setting as an untransformed self, stuck in all the particularities of their false-self patterns.” Individuals who are not open to hearing God speak or unable to discern God’s voice will make the corporate process difficult.

The danger is not only that they will not hear God, but that the inauthenticity may make it difficult for others to remain open to hearing. As a result, Barton speaks to the need to create safe space within the group for listening to one another in addition to listening to God. She writes, “A commitment to leadership discernment requires cultivating an environment in which it is safe for people to speak from their heart and

43 Ibid., 10.

44 Ibid., 114.
soul, not just their mind.”\textsuperscript{45} Corporate discernment parallels individual discernment in that it takes vulnerability and self-awareness to be able to discern the voice of God from the other voices clamoring for attention. Achieving this authenticity in a group setting requires people to feel safe within the community in addition to their personal vulnerability. To deal with this fragility, a community needs to set rules and covenants to help define itself as a safe space for discernment.

In addition to the multiplier effect of multiple individuals, corporate discernment potentially adds obstacles when navigating the group’s own systems and culture.\textsuperscript{46} These will often subconsciously affect how a group relates in the communication among its members and with God. Additionally, the connection of people in any given space can derail the discernment process as people listen to one another in lieu of listening for the voice of God. Barton notes the insidious nature of groupthink by writing, “When groupthink takes over in a leadership setting, we all miss the work of God. But since we have done it together, we have no idea that we missed it and might even congratulate ourselves on our excellent leadership!”\textsuperscript{47}

Groups committed to corporate discernment face cultural, systemic, and social pressures that often cloud discernment of the voice of God. But leadership committed to discernment and spiritual transformation will begin to change the community on each of these levels.\textsuperscript{48} It will also provide the crucible in which individuals are challenged to

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 132.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 83.
grow in personal discernment and spiritual transformation. To aid this process, Barton speaks to personal and corporate practices like prayers for indifference, wisdom, confession, and trust.

*Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* ends with a practical process for corporate discernment. It brings each of the facets of individual and corporate spiritual practice and preparation into a process designed to clear space for a group to recognize and respond to God in the midst of the question on hand. The outcome of the process is as much about the way the community is developed and the individual is spiritually transformed as it is about unanimity on the issue at hand. The expectation is that the development of a discerning community will strengthen the group for living its relationship in Jesus Christ with one another and the world around it.

**Conclusion**

Each of these works provides foundational stones for the work of discernment at BHPC. Friesen’s *Decision Making and the Will of God* provides language and permission to hear God speak in the gifts and wisdom the leaders of BHPC have developed over the years. Willard’s *Hearing God* provides rational and practical groundwork for the role of hearing God speak through direct communication like the still, small voice. Peace’s *Noticing God* provides more breadth to the ways that God is present and communicating in the world. Dubay’s *Authenticity* provides a sobering focus upon the discerner of God’s voice. And Barton’s *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* bridges personal discernment practices with the need for corporate discernment in the leadership of the church. Together these provide a breadth of understanding for the experience of hearing
God speak. They provide practical structure and processes to inspire the practice of discernment.
CHAPTER 3
A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF DISCERNMENT

This chapter presents a theological framework for the development of discernment at BHPC. It explores the foundations of discernment where the church has experienced and been prepared to hear God speak. This chapter also examines the difficulties associated with recognizing God’s voice as well as the ways those difficulties are mitigated. Particular attention is paid to the complications and potential in corporate discernment. The chapter ends with spiritual guideposts drawn from Scripture to guide BHPC in its efforts to develop practices of discernment.

Foundations of Discernment

The underlying grace of discernment is that God speaks in ways that people can hear. In speaking, God is made available to people. This is not to say that God speaks to all people in the same way. Rather, God speaks differently into the lives of different people. Peace goes so far as to say that he suspects “that God addresses each of us in
ways that are unique to us.\textsuperscript{1} In this sense, God’s speaking is incarnational. God speaks into the unique context of each person’s life.

Despite the uniqueness of the voice of God in each context, there is commonality in the ways God speaks. Awareness of the ways God commonly speaks help to prepare people to listen and recognize when God speaks in those ways. This is the reason discernment practices are useful. They open people to the potential of God speaking in commonly experienced ways and give them the framework to recognize God’s voice.\textsuperscript{2} This is not to suggest that discernment does not happen apart from discernment practices. In \textit{Hearing God}, Willard suggests that people often experience God’s voice without realizing they are practicing discernment.\textsuperscript{3}

The purpose of this section is to identify the ways God has been speaking to BHPC. The foundations for discernment are places the church has already been hearing God speak or is available to do so. This section examines the church’s theological roots and practices linked to its denominational polity and history. Then, it studies the church’s experiences with streams of practice and thoughts from outside the denomination. Finally, this section investigates the church leadership’s secular training in decision making. The assumption is that God is accessible and speaking. The focus is upon the church’s foundations for discernment.

\textsuperscript{1} Peace, \textit{Noticing God}, 59.

\textsuperscript{2} Attempts to list and categorize the ways that God speaks to people are useful but beyond the scope of this paper. In addition to illustrating the differences of opinion, the literature review in the previous chapter provided insight into the breadth of experiences, from the objective wisdom espoused by Friesen to the more subjective experience described by Peace and Willard.

\textsuperscript{3} Willard, \textit{Hearing God}, 18.
Presbyterian Practices

The Presbyterian Church provides ample footing for discernment within BHPC. Some of this ground is hidden from sight in the shape of the church’s theological roots. In many places, discernment processes are built into the church’s business interactions and polity. In others, opportunity for discernment in the visioning and decision making of the church are available but often missed or overlooked. Nevertheless, BHPC’s identity and connection with the denomination’s polity and history lends immediate credence to practices of discernment that spring from its Presbyterianism.

The Presbyterian Church is firmly grounded in Reformed theology. At its heart, Reformed theology is based upon discernment. It was created as the Church attempted to discern its form and theology in the midst of the Protestant Reformation. In homage to the ongoing task of reformation and thus discernment, the Reformed Church referred to itself using the motto *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* or “reformed and always reforming.”

Even though discernment is a key part of Reformed theology, it preferred to limit hearing from God in the form of wisdom derived from Scripture. Early Reformed theologians had a strong understanding of the fallibility of people,\(^4\) which made them uncomfortable with more subjective discernment practices. In an article in *Presbyterians Today*, Anna Case-Winters points out that this is why in many places the reformed motto

\(^4\) Early Reformed theologian John Calvin illustrates this perspective on the fallibility of people in the task of discernment in his Institutes of Christian Religion, 2.2.12: “As the human mind is unable, from dullness, to pursue the right path of investigation, and after various wanderings, stumbling every now and then like one groping in darkness, at length gets completely bewildered, so its whole procedure proves how unfit it is to search for the truth and find it. Then it labors under another grievous defect, in that it frequently fails to discern what knowledge is which it should study.”
appears “completed with a clarifying addition so that it reads... ‘reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God.’ Reform, where it is advocated, must find its grounding in Scripture.”

Though the PC(USA)’s theology springs from Reformed theology, the denomination’s statements of belief and practice are published in the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order. Both of these documents provide wide latitude for subjective discernment. Early in the Book of Order, space is given to reform the Church’s belief and practice. It states, “Yet the church, in obedience to Jesus Christ, is open to the reform of its standards of doctrine as well as of governance. The church affirms ‘Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda,’ that ‘The church reformed, is always reforming,’ according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.” In faithfulness to Christ, room is given for the reform of the Church in response to the leading of the Holy Spirit and according to Scripture.

While the Presbyterian Church does not anticipate the reformation of the Church, its openness to the voice of God is important. This is reiterated in the Confession of 1967, which was drafted by the denomination during the 1960s to challenge the church in its “relationship to the modern world.” The confession states, “In each time and place, there are particular problems and crises through which God calls the church to act. The church,

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6 PCUSA, Book of Order, G-2.0200.

guided by the Holy Spirit, humbled by its own complicity and instructed by all attainable
knowledge, seeks to discern the will of God and learn how to obey in these concrete
situations.” There is the expectation of discernment within the theology of the Church
that will allow God to lead the Church in ministry and mission to deal with contemporary
realities.

This theology plays out practically in the polity of PCUSA churches. Church
leadership in the form of ordained elders are expected to use discernment in the
governance of the church. Elders are chosen as “persons with particular gifts to share in
discernment of God’s Spirit and governance of God’s people.” This individual
discernment is worked out corporately with a mix of discussion, discernment, and rule by
majority vote. There is an expectation that discernment plays a role in the theology and
the governance of the church.

Discernment is written deeply into the theology and governance of the
Presbyterian Church. Aspects of prayer and discussion within the polity of the governing
board have prepared the leadership of BHPC for, and practically invited them into,
discernment practices. This theological framework and understanding provides the
foundation to further develop the church’s discernment practices.

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8 *Book of Confessions*, 9.43, 259.

9 *Book of Order*, G-2.301.

10 *Book of Order*, F-3.0205
Non-Denominational Experiences

While giving BHPC’s leadership ample space and expectation for hearing God’s voice, the denomination leaves particular discernment practices undefined. Like most mainline Protestant denominations, the church inherited vague notions of Bible Study and prayer as its only connection points to discerning the voice of God. The practice of corporate discernment was largely left in the realm of rational discussion and debate.

In the last decade, the church has been exposed to streams of thought and practice from outside the denomination. Three practices in particular have been explored by either the church as a whole or the leadership in particular. Lectio divina, daily examen, and appreciative inquiry have all been practiced in the life of BHPC.

*Lectio divina* (translated “divine reading”) is a discernment practice that uses Scripture to “listen for the word of God spoken to us in the present moment.” Instead of intellectually approaching Scripture alone, the practice of lectio divina incorporates aspects of meditation and prayer with the reading in an effort to engage the listener holistically. The goal of this practice is not information but hearing God speak to the practitioner. Author Larry Warner describes the goal of *lectio divina* as becoming “listeners, desiring to hear the still small voice of God.”

*Lectio divina* has been practiced at BHPC in various small group settings for devotional practice. In 2006, the leadership of the church underwent a visioning process led by the pastors. Over a period of several months, the leaders of church gathered in the

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sanctuary of the church to practice lectio divina using several passages that were core to the life and mission of the church. The direct result of this use of lectio divina as a corporate practice was the development of the church’s vision statement. The indirect result was comfort with and occasional practice of lectio divina within the flow of polity.

The daily examen is a discernment practice derived from a monastic order in the Catholic Church. The intention of the examen is to create space for a person to pause and review his or her day in prayerful awareness of God’s presence. Warren writes, “The goal of the examen is to gradually develop an internalized openness and sensitivity to the promptings and invitations of God throughout the course of your day.”13 The examen is an individual discernment practice meant to deepen the practitioner’s awareness of God’s presence throughout the day.

During Lent in 2015, BHPC practiced the daily examen as a community. In concert with sermons meant to deepen understanding of core concepts, the church developed a journal that was distributed to each member and attender during worship services. The direct results of the practice were anecdotal due to the individual nature of the discernment practice. The indirect result was the introduction of the discernment practice into the life of the community.

Appreciative Inquiry is not typically thought of as a discernment practice for listening for the voice of God. It was originally created as a means of listening to the corporate voice in an organization or community. Mark Lau Branson of Fuller

Theological Seminary writes, “By discovering the best and most valuable narratives and qualities of an organization, participants can construct a new way that has the most important links to the past and the most hopeful images of the future.”¹⁴ Within a faith setting, Appreciative Inquiry becomes a way that churches can “rediscover the stories that most likely indicate God’s presence and actions.”¹⁵ Appreciative Inquiry as a discernment practice is one that combines storytelling, gratitude, Scripture, prayer, discussion, and reframing to discover God’s presence. In many ways, it operates as a corporate version of the *examen*.

Various aspects of Appreciative Inquiry have been practiced with the leadership and congregation at BHPC. Several years ago, the retirement of two long-term employees provided a confluence of grief and change that called for the discernment made available in Appreciative Inquiry. Several town hall opportunities were provided for congregants to remember, share, pray, grieve, and vision the future of the ministries identified with the retiring employees. These meetings informed church leadership as they discerned next steps in the ministries affected by the retirements.

Each of these discernment practices have stretched BHPC to broaden its understanding of how God is able to speak. These practices have either begun to open or give framework for understanding the more subjective experiences of hearing God. Although these practices have been introduced, they are far from being part of the default discernment experiences for the leadership at BHPC.


¹⁵ Ibid., 54.
Best Business Practices

Subjective discernment practices often bump up against the secular training and experiences of the leadership at BHPC. During a recent meeting where the leadership of the church was attempting to discern a personnel decision that had large vision and budgetary ramifications, this tension became apparent. One leader made a cogent argument on one side of the discussion, only to be dismissed by another leader as lacking faith. In frustration, the first leader exclaimed, “Is there even a place for my business perspective?”

The immediate answer to this question is complex. The tendency within the leadership of the church is to default to a business rationale. The expectation is that important decisions require business decision-making processes. The logic follows that spiritual discernment processes should be reserved for spiritual decisions. To some degree, this train of thought lacks faith that God speaks into business decisions.

But a business perspective on a decision-making process need not lack faith. Rather, it is a part of the discernment process to discover God’s voice and lead. The wisdom, experience, and expertise are part of the ways that God has equipped the leadership of BHPC to discern. Friesen describes it this way: “The ultimate Source of wisdom needed in decision making is God. Accordingly, we are to ask him to provide what we lack. God mediates his wisdom to us through His Word, our personal research, wise counselors, and applied lessons of life.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Friesen, Decision Making, 183.
Part of the way that God has equipped BHPC for the discerning of leadership is in the business wisdom within its leadership. Its business wisdom, experience, and expertise is a foundation for discernment. It is a place the church can develop its ability to recognize God’s voice, transforming rationality into discernment.

God has prepared BHPC to hear God’s voice. He has provided foundations for discernment in the history, theology, experiences, and wisdom within the church. These foundations offer space to build upon as the church seeks to develop the tools and empower its leadership to discern the voice of God. They provide a beginning intellectual framework and language to explore the development of experiences of discernment. They inform the creation of the didactic portion of this project.

**Difficulties**

In addition to the foundations of discernment present in the church, it is necessary to address the expected obstacles of discernment. The source of all difficulty in discernment is the fallenness of humanity. When God speaks into the lives of people, their brokenness becomes part of hearing and communicating what God has said. Dubay notes, “In one way discernment is most simple, that is, when one has become a saint. In another way it is complex, even impossible, that is, when one is a sinner.”

Despite the cynicism of this quote, discernment is not impossible, even for sinners. But the difficulties that make hearing God’s voice complex need to be considered.

First, discernment is difficult because it runs counter to the practices and beliefs practiced by the world. The opening chapters of this project described the cultural context.

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of BHPC. The area’s rapidly changing demographics, cultural complexity, and contrast with the church are the impetus for this project. The goal is to be able to hear God speak and lead BHPC in mission and ministry in the midst of complexity. Even as Los Angeles and Beverly Hills inspire the church toward discernment, they influence the church away from a focus upon God’s voice. The people who make up BHPC and its leadership live, work, and identify themselves with Los Angeles and Beverly Hills. Their context’s fixation on wealth and fame provide little room for spiritual discernment. Thus, in order to embark upon the path of discernment, the leaders of BHPC is forced to make a conscious choice to live counter to the culture in which they live.

Cultural opposition is not merely felt on the level of contrasting identity, goals, and purposes. The practice of listening for God’s voice runs counter to many of the individualistic and rational practices of those raised in Western culture.\(^{18}\) The beliefs and worldview of a person often needs to be radically altered in order to allow for the possibility that God speaks. Willard writes, “Our preexisting ideas and assumptions are what actually determine what we can see, hear or otherwise observe.”\(^{19}\) Discernment requires a person’s beliefs to be shaped in new ways.

Second, discernment is difficult because of the personal brokenness of each member of BHPC. Brokenness can result in a reluctance to engage in discernment. Willard spends considerable time discussing the reasons people do not hear God’s voice.


\(^{19}\) Willard, *Hearing God*, 86.
He points to the ways in which one’s expectations,\textsuperscript{20} lifestyle,\textsuperscript{21} and how “in tune” one is with God\textsuperscript{22} affect the ability to hear God speak. Hearing God speak radically changes how people relates to themselves, to God, and to the world around them. This is not an experience that every person desires.

Brokenness can also inhibit the ability of a person to recognize God’s voice. Dubay writes, “Our sinfulness as well as our native intellectual limitations readily explain why the expressions of divine experience may be altered by our unrealized pride and preferences.”\textsuperscript{23} A person’s sinfulness may prevent a person from hearing God speak, adulterate how God is heard, disturb the process of taking in what God says, or affect how it is communicated to others.

An illustration of this difficulty is found in the tension described earlier between faith and business acumen in the decision-making processes of the leadership of BHPC. On one hand, business wisdom is given by God for the purpose of discernment. It is a foundation for discernment in BHPC that can be built upon. On the other hand, it often manifests in a proclivity to limit God’s voice to rational processes. There is strong grounding for this within the legacy of the Presbyterian Church. A maxim often stated within Reformed theology is the idea that “all truth is God’s truth.” Therefore, the truth that is revealed in rational discussion can confidently be called God’s truth. Presbyterian polity structures its decision-making process around civil discourse to this end.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 93.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 91.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{23} Dubay, \textit{Authenticity}, 93.
Discernment steps deeper than purely rational processes. In a paper published in *Ecumenical Trends*, a Roman Catholic Council of Churches in Massachusetts wrote about its own processes, “Discernment is seeking of God’s will in a matter, not simply a good decision from a pragmatic perspective. It is inviting the spiritual dimension into our business, and opening ourselves to God’s perspective.”  

The council went on to address the ways they are often reluctant to allow the rational conversation to deepen. The paper continued, “We might be afraid to let the Holy Spirit lead. Sometimes we are more comfortable when the tasks before us demand mental energy and good logical thinking, than when we are asked to let go of our rational selves and allow the presence of the Holy Spirit to move us.”  

Discernment builds upon the foundation of wisdom in logical thinking. But God must be allowed to move beyond the rationality of those who seek to hear God’s voice.

One of the reasons for this is that the source of rational arguments are not always based upon reason. Rather they are often found in habits and emotions. In order for God to be revealed in wisdom, participants of discernment must be honest with God on the level of their emotions and their will in addition to their intellect. If not, brokenness holds wisdom captive by limiting the space in which the Holy Spirit is invited to work. Barton writes, “Discernment requires, first of all, that we are able to discern matters of

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25 Ibid., 1-7.

26 Richard Pascale, Mark Millemann, and Linda Gioja tangentially address this concept in their book, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos: The Laws of Nature and the New Laws of Business* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000), 14. They write, “As a general rule, adults are much more likely to act their way into a new way of thinking than to think their way into a new way of acting.”
our own heart. A leader cannot be discerning about external matters if they are not able to
discern what is true and false within themselves.”27

Wisdom as a means of discerning the voice of God is both a gift from God and an
opportunity. When the Holy Spirit is allowed to lead, rational conversation will often
result in wisdom and processes that address emotional and spiritual places of need. If not,
then rational conversations can be a place where the brokenness of people in the
unaddressed emotional or spiritual realities hijack the discernment process. Then,
brokenness affects how a person hears God speak, adulterates how God is heard, disturbs
the process of taking in what God says, and affects how it is communicated to others.

Third, discernment is difficult because of the possibility that what has been heard
is not from God. There are times when people believe that God has spoken to them when
God has not. The task of discernment includes being able to recognize when
communication is from God and when it is not. False communication can be the result of
personal brokenness when it originates within a person. It can also come from something
as complex as the demonic28 or as simple as a misunderstanding. Frank Rogers, Jr. states
that part of the process of discernment is attempting to understand “whether sources of
these various stirrings were divine, demonic, or neurotic.”29

Perhaps it should not be surprising that there are difficulties involved in the
communication between the Holy God and broken humanity. Though this chapter begins

27 Barton, Pursuing God's Will Together, 45

28 A full discussion on the role of the demonic or spiritual warfare is beyond the scope of this paper.

29 Frank Rogers, Jr., “Discernment,” in Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching

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with difficulties, by design it does not end with them. Difficulties must be considered because they are part of the landscape of discernment. But the ultimate design for humanity is to be brought not only into communication but union with God. Since this is God’s purpose, as people turn to God in faith, it will be.

**Mitigating**

On the surface, it might appear that the only solution to the difficulties in discernment is perfection or the eradication of sin. This is not wrong; but the perfection and righteousness that discernment is based upon is provided in relationship with Jesus Christ. People do not navigate the waters of discernment on their own. God partners with people in ways that allow the process of God speaking and people hearing to be both healing and clear. That partnership comes in objective partnership with the testimony of the Holy Spirit through the Church and Scriptures. It is also displayed in subjective partnership of a maturing relationship with deepening experiences with God in discernment.

The source of all recognition of the voice of God is in the Holy Spirit’s testimony about God. The two most objective expressions of this testimony are found in the written Word of God and the Body of Christ. On their own, both of these expressions are fallible in the same way all discernment is fallible due to the participation of broken humanity. But God fills the Church and Scripture with the Holy Spirit to enable them to testify. It is

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30 The use of the word “objective” in this setting is not absolute but rather comparative in relation to the subjective experiences of discernment.
for this reason that discernment is often described as an art form\textsuperscript{31} or a charism\textsuperscript{32} rather than a methodology.

The primary standard useful for discernment is found in Scripture. The logic is that God will not speak to an individual in ways that contradict God’s self-revelation through Scripture. Willard makes a helpful distinction between the principles and incidentals of Scripture. He argues that proper exegesis recognizes that certain ideas are connected to the core of the Gospel message. Willard writes, “What you want to believe from the Bible is its message on the whole and use it as a standard for interpreting the peripheral passages.”\textsuperscript{33} Even with this distinction, there is much debate and interpretation about Scripture. Charles Conrad points out in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, “Because biblical references are often ambiguous and because the Bible as a whole is replete with inconsistencies, parishioners can rely on biblical references to support almost any position they want to take on any issue.”\textsuperscript{34} As a result, while Scripture is the primary tool in discernment, it is not always clear.

A second standard against which to test communication from God is the Church. The logic is that God’s communication will be confirmed by the way that the rest of the church is being led by the Holy Spirit. The church also provides accountability. The body of Christ can be trusted to discern not just the content of what was heard but also the


\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 28.

\textsuperscript{33} Willard, *Hearing God*, 232.

ways that the brokenness of the hearer might be affecting the communication. Dubay writes, “In the Christic economy when specific divine messages are given, they must be submitted to human authorities. . . . The New Testament gives no comfort to visionaries who deem themselves exempt from any structural approval.”

As with Scripture, the local church is an imperfect means of mitigating the difficulties of discernment. There are times where prophetic voices have spoken God’s word to churches in ways that were not readily accepted but did not lessen their authenticity. Nevertheless, even in such a scenario, it can be assumed that God’s communication was intended for the church as much as for the prophet. The connection between discernment of God’s voice and the church is unassailable.

The goal of discernment is not simply to receive communication. The goal is to move people into deeper maturity of faith and relationship with God. One of the results of this deepening maturity is health that comes from God’s presence in rational, emotional, and spiritual processes. As relationship with God matures and authentic health deepens within a person, discernment becomes clearer. In essence, discernment begets discernment.

Again, Willard provides helpful systematic structure to the subjective experience of recognizing God’s voice through experience and relationship. He writes, “What we discern when we learn to recognize God’s voice in our heart is a certain weight or force, a certain spirit and a certain content in the thoughts that come in God’s communications to

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35 Dubay, *Authenticity*, 70.
us. These three things in combination mark the voice of God.” In essence, the repeated experience of hearing God’s voice brings a familiarity that can be recognized.

Other authors describe an effect the voice or presence of God has upon a person. In contrast to false communications, the authentic voice of God bears the experience of peace. It is often referred to with Paul’s words in Philippians 4:7, “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,” because it is an experience that transcends the peace that humans typically experience. Frank Rodgers describes it as “a deep sense of peace and calm” that “is humble, serene, and open to correction.” Dubay states that it is not a general feeling of peace but rather “a peace that accompanies a particular proposal, decision, activity.” Perhaps the peace is most noticeable for what it is not. It is not the anxiety, fear, doubt, and insecurity that typically accompanies a person who is attempting to make sense of a complex world. Rather it is an experience defined by partnership with God.

As a person matures in his or her relationship with God, certain characteristics spring from experiences of discernment and aid the ability to recognize God’s voice. Experiences of discernment result in the fruit of the Spirit in a person’s life. A result of partnering with God is the character of God being present in both the effect of the communication and the person’s own life. Similarly, Dubay lists “detachment, inner freedom, and the absence of illusory desires” as characteristics that result from

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38 Dubay, *Authenticity*, 220.

discernment and increase the likelihood of its repeat.40 As people compile experiences of hearing God speak, the hold that the world has upon them is lessened. These individuals move in a freedom that is both the result of hearing God and positioning themselves to recognize and respond to God’s voice in the future. The life of a person who hears God’s voice is changed by the experience and by the deepening relationship with God that results.

On their own, each of these mitigating factors is fraught with difficulty. Rodgers bluntly writes, “None of these criteria is absolute; each of them is open to distortion and exception. In the end, spiritual discernment depends on faith.”41 But when together they are under the direction of the Holy Spirit, God’s people are shaped by the voice of God.

**Corporate versus Individual**

Often, when God speaks the communication is not solely for the individual but for the community. At other times, it is the community that is seeking to understand God’s will in the midst of decision making. In both of these occasions, discernment is done by a group of people together.

Corporate discernment carries with it its own difficulties. Along with the contrasting voices within the greater context, communities of people—most notably churches—tend to have their own culture that holds sway over decision-making and expectations. As pastor and author Gordon Smith notes, “The problem is straightforward: people often choose poorly because they are overly conscious of the expectations of their


community.”\textsuperscript{42} In addition to cultural expectations, the social dynamics of corporate discernment can also disrupt listening. Barton cautions against the danger of “groupthink” taking over a leadership setting.\textsuperscript{43}

At the basis of corporate discernment are personal discernment practices. The group relies upon its members’ abilities to listen to and recognize the voice of God. But it is more than a collection of individual discernerers. The ability of any individual to discern and communicate what is being heard is dependent upon the group’s ability to listen to one another and create safe space for sharing together. The balance of corporate discernment is easily derailed by individuals who lack the experience or maturity for the process. Barton warns, “Individuals not engaged in regular spiritual practices will engage the leadership setting as an untransformed self, stuck in the particularities of their false-self patterns.”\textsuperscript{44}

When groups consider corporate discernment, there is a tension in the expectations. On one hand, there is the recognition that each member of the community is a unique creation of God carrying the possibility of God speaking to them. On the other hand, there is frustration and worry about the least spiritual person in the community setting the tone and pace for a decision.

This tension can be mitigated by shifting the question to be answered. In an article in \textit{The Christian Century}, Amy Johnson Frykholm notes, “With decision making taking


\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 114.
place in the context of prayer, punctuated by silence, the question for church councils is not, ‘Do we all agree?’ but ‘Do we have a sense of what God is doing?’”\(^{45}\) It is helpful to reframe the expectations to focus the process of hearing from God rather than the agreement of individual opinions.

The tension is further mitigated by redefining the definition of agreement. Frykholm continues, “The first kind of consensus is the easiest: everyone agrees. In the second type, someone disagrees with some aspect of the decision but has decided that she can live with it. In the third type of consensus, someone disagrees completely, but still feels that she can live with the decision.”\(^{46}\) Again, Frykholm reframes expectations to allow for a community to operate in unity despite lack of unanimity on an issue.

Instead of consensus, the Presbyterian Church has attempted to mitigate the expectations of agreement by requiring a simple majority in most decision-making. This allows for quicker decision-making in the midst of disagreement. It also makes allowance for members of the community who lack maturity in discernment to be part of the process without defining it. The skepticism of this position is well stated by Dubay, who writes, “When the members of a group are all open to the Holy Spirit, a discernment process can produce consensus, but who will maintain that in our sinful condition we can hope in larger societies to be free from selfishness and ignorance of all sorts.”\(^{47}\)


\(^{46}\) Ibid.

\(^{47}\) Dubay, *Authenticity*, 229.
While this skepticism is practically warranted, the discomfort of corporate discernment faithfully undertaken contains the promise of deepening the faith of the entire community. By practicing discernment corporately, the individual is empowered with models and experiences that can inform his or her personal faith. As more individuals are empowered to listen more deeply, the corporate discernment process is also deepened. Author Margaret Benefiel states this symbiosis beautifully by writing, “Individual and corporate discernment dance together, hand in hand. Corporate discernment requires prepared hearts and minds of the individuals involved. Individual discernment requires the support of a community, nurturing and grounding the person’s spiritual life. Individual discernment also requires the accountability of a community, offering checks and balances to the individual’s discernment.”

Corporate discernment carries social challenges that seem to exacerbate the difficulties involved in individual discernment. But it is in those social challenges that there is the greatest hope of creating a community that recognizes God’s voice in ministry and mission. Discernment begets discernment in the life of the individual but also into the lives of those around them.

**Guideposts and Goals**

In the next chapter, this project turns to the practical steps of building practices of discernment for BHPC. This is done with an awareness of the foundations that have already been laid in the church, as well as mindfulness of the difficulties of discernment.

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But practices constructed with intentionality alone would do disservice to both the church and the God who makes Godself available to the church. It would be akin to religiosity without intimacy. This section addresses the intimacy of the discernment process at BHPC.

The purpose of this section is to set guideposts. Guideposts are set along a path to remind the traveler of the goal. They are both a reminder and encouragement without speaking into technical practices. But they will do much to make sure those practices are aimed in the proper direction and infused with purpose. Guideposts make sure that practices are focused upon the goal.

The goal of this project is Jesus. It is to develop a closeness of relationship through the ability to recognize the voice of God. It is to influence the lives of people to reflect Jesus in mission and ministry. It is important to know at the outset that this goal is both unattainable and present reality. It is unattainable because it is a work in progress that always calls the follower to deeper faith and love. It is a present reality because discernment is about recognizing God’s present availability.

In order to keep BHPC focused on the goal within the practices of discernment, three guideposts will be constructed, each taken from a passage of Scripture. They are designed to encourage people in the midst of struggle and to mitigate the difficulties that threaten to hijack what is meant for good. They provide vision for the entire structure, even when all that is visible are the foundations for discernment already laid.
Grace into Complexity: Philippians 3:15-16

There is complexity involved in discernment at BHPC on two levels. First, the context of the church in relation to the culture is complex. The questions being asked of the church today are not directly correlated to the answers the church provided in the past. This is the basis for the call to discernment in this project. Second, the context of the people who make up BHPC is diverse. Because these differences can quickly become the basis of tensions and conflict that undermine the community, “they must be managed.”

This complexity is not unique to BHPC. While being careful not to overstate the parallel, the church in Philippi during the time of Paul’s imprisonment in Rome suffered similar complexity. The Philippian church contrasted sharply with the “Roman character” of the city where the emperor cult “meant that every public event (the assembly, public performances in the theater, etc.) and much else within its boundaries would have taken place in the context of giving honor to the emperor, with the acknowledgement (in this case) Nero was ‘lord and savior.’” Additionally, internal divisions in the community included Christians “opposed to Paul himself” and “Jewish missionaries . . . who aggressively pushed for converts at Philippi.” In a context of complexity, the Apostle Paul writes a pastoral text that provides the first guidepost for discernment at BHPC.


51 Ibid, 31.

In Philippians 3:15-16, the apostle writes, “Let those of us who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.” In order to understand these words, one needs to understand that the disagreements in Philippi were combative. Earlier, in Philippians 3:2, Paul refers to those who disagree with him as “dogs,” “evil workers,” and “those who mutilate the flesh.” The differing opinions and interpretations of faith were deep.

Even so, in Philippians 3:15-16, Paul strikes a pastoral note that offers a path to managing the conflict often found in complexity. In the *Word Biblical Commentary* volume on Philippians, Gerald F. Hawthorne writes, “His style of writing appears designed powerfully to affect his readers, to move them to change, to create within them the same appreciation for and pursuit of Christ that he himself experiences, rather than to put down any enemies one can imagine.”53 The heart of Paul’s expectation that those of differing opinions have hope of coming together in unity is discernment. Paul’s expectation is that where there is disagreement, agreement will come as God speaks to all involved.

What makes this text a guidepost for discernment at BHPC is not the hope that unity will spring from discernment. Rather, it is the way it creates safe space for people in the midst of disagreement. This text sets a tone of humility and gentleness that needs to pervade attempts to hear God speak, process what is heard, and communicate it to others.

The basis of Paul’s humility in these texts is an awareness that his own
discernment and understanding of Jesus is imperfect and incomplete. In Philippians 3:12,
he writes, “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I
press on to make it my own.” Hawthorne notes, “Paul means to say that he does not claim
to have fully grasped the meaning of Christ at this point in time.” Of course, this is not a
claim of ignorance or agnosticism. Rather, it is the dual admission that he is in the
process of relationship with God that allows for him to discover new things and that he
may be mistaken. Dubay writes, “Where this healthy fear (of being mistaken) is absent . .
. the Spirit of God is never present.”

This humility leaves room for differences of opinion and even interpretation. This
is not to say that Paul is allowing for plurality of truth, but rather that there is room for
communion amidst differing opinions on the road to discovery. When differences of
opinion are present, humility is portrayed in gentleness to the other. It is gentleness
shown in patience for God to speak and in the honoring admission that God speaks to the
other, too. It is this shared relationship with God that the community can cling to in order
to bind them together in times of disagreement.

In Philippians 3:15-16, the Apostle Paul sets the first guidepost for discernment at
BHPC. Discernment in the midst of complexity must be undertaken in humility and
gentleness toward one another. In this way, unity will be possible, even in the midst of

54 Ibid., 151.

55 Dubay, Authenticity, 133.
disagreement, based upon shared faith in Jesus Christ and in expectation that God speaks to the other, too.

Caught Between Two Worlds: Matthew 5:13-16

The dividing line between the Church and the surrounding culture is not drawn at the boundary lines of a church’s property. Rather, it occurs within the heart of every Christian. The members of the Church are identified both in their relationship with Christ and their relationship with the culture. Attempts to identify with each of these two contrasting realities is difficult. In his commentary on the book of Ephesians, John Stott writes, “Indeed all Christian people are saints and believers, and live both in Christ and in the secular world, or ‘in the heavenlies’ and on earth. Many of our spiritual troubles arise from our failure to remember that we are citizens of two kingdoms. We tend either to pursue Christ and withdraw from the world, or to become preoccupied with the world and forget that we are also in Christ.”56

When God speaks, God speaks in the midst of this complexity. The hope of this project is that discernment will directly speak to this complexity both in how individual Christians identify mission and in how the Church engages in mission. The second guidepost for discernment at BHPC is drawn from a text that addresses this relationship between Christians and the world they live in.

In the sermon on the mount recorded in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus uses two parables to speak to the relationship between the disciples he is addressing and the world

they live in. He speaks about them using the metaphors of salt and light. In the context of discernment at BHPC, this text speaks to both the identity of the church and its mission. Matthew 5:13-16 states,

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Willard speaks to the role identity plays in the ability to hear God speak. He writes, “Even for many of us who already profess to follow Christ, much inward change will still be needed before we will be able to hear God correctly.”\(^{57}\) For Christians caught between their identities in the two kingdoms, it is difficult to hear God correctly in regard to their identity and the role that God intends that they play.

In this parable, Jesus unambiguously states the importance of Christians. They are identified with a metaphor Jesus had associated with himself earlier in Matthew 4:16. They are the light of the world. In the words of Dale Bruner, the intention of these metaphors is “to lift Christians into a certain self-esteem, into a clearer self-consciousness (‘You are very important people!’)”\(^{58}\)

Connected to the realization of the importance of the Christian to God is the importance of the Christian to the world. God did not make the Church light for its own sake. It is meant to be light for the world. Too often, Christians allow their identity in the

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\(^{57}\) Willard, *Hearing God*, 199.

world to overshadow their identity in Christ. A guidepost for discernment at BHPC is the reminder of the importance of each believer to Jesus Christ. The expectation is that hearing God speak will deepen each individual’s sense of his or her own importance in relationship with Jesus. Dubay states, “The deepest value in a divine communication does not lie in clear concepts or blueprints for future action. It lies in a deeper drinking of the divine, a drinking that is general, dark, non-conceptual, love-immersed.”

Nevertheless, a deepening relationship with Jesus will begin to redefine the hearer’s relationship with the world. Hearing God speak will not only reaffirm the importance of the hearer, but it will also give them a heart for those who are unaware of the light of Christ. Ultimately, discernment will help BHPC redefine its own importance in relation to God and in mission to the world.

What to Say: Matthew 10:19-20

This project is based upon the expectation that the Church is not alone as a witness into the world. The Church is not expected to figure out how to convince people of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As that task becomes more complicated and the world becomes less open to the gospel, the job of the Church is to look with expectation for God to provide.

The final text is written to a Church in persecution. Matthew 10:16-18 reveals that the contrast between faith and the culture would become so acute that the Church would be persecuted because of Jesus. Disciples would be dragged into settings where they have

59 Dubay, Authenticity, 117.
no competence or power.\textsuperscript{60} The natural response is self-preservation. But Matthew 10:19-20 points instead to discernment: “When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but he Spirit of the Father speaking through you.”

BHPC is not a church under persecution. But it is a church that faces contrast between its faith and its culture. The competence of the past no longer serves its witness. The final guidepost for discernment for BHPC is the expectation that the church is not alone in witness into Beverly Hills. The church is called to look to the Holy Spirit to provide testimony. Practices of discernment are the faithful attempt to recognize God’s voice when God speaks.

\textbf{Conclusion}

One of the ways that God equips the Church is by speaking to people. Listening to God speak has the potential to guide the Church and individuals in terms of how to live their faith in the midst of diverse contexts. But listening to God is a practice that must be developed. It is a practice that has both difficulties and the means of making the way through those difficulties. The church that considers the potential benefits of developing discernment practices does not do so alone. It proceeds with a community called to listen together with humility and gentleness. It moves in an identity and mission that connects it to Jesus’ intention not only for those involved but for the world around them. Finally, it advances with an expectation that the Holy Spirit will direct it to words and actions that

match the needs of its diverse context. Discernment is the way that people learn to listen and relate to God in the midst of the complexity of life.
PART THREE

MINISTRY STRATEGY
CHAPTER 4
AN INTEGRATED STRATEGY: GOALS AND PLANS

The stated purpose of this project is to develop the leadership and congregation at BHPC in the discernment of God’s voice. This chapter shifts the ideological purpose of the project into practical steps. It walks through the plans of the instituting a class made up of volunteers from one of the church’s key leadership boards, the deacons.

The class is created with three goals in mind. First, it is designed to help the leaders of BHPC to understand discernment. In reflection upon Dallas Willard’s contention that many people have had experiences of discernment but lack a framework of understanding, the first desired outcome of this class is an understanding of God speaking.¹ Second, the class is planned to equip the participants with practices and tools for personal discernment to deepen their ability to hear and recognize God’s voice. These tools are presented as practices that have been used by others to create space for discernment rather than mechanical rules. Part of the practice includes the recognition that discernment is part of relationship with God rather than a methodology. Finally, the

class is designed to move the participants into the practice of discernment in a corporate setting. The goal of the class is to empower the participants in their individual lives and in their corporate leadership practices and vision.

**Difficulties**

Several factors within the culture of BHPC will create obstacles to the successful execution of this class. The class has been designed in a way that is aware of and attempts to mitigate these factors. The primary difficulty arises from the ways that the community of the church operates as a Sunday only experience. The vast majority of members and leadership resist participation in events, classes, or fellowship opportunities outside of Sunday mornings. The reason for this is largely due to the busyness of the average member of the church community. A secondary reason for this springs from the realities of the geographic location of the church on the west side of Los Angeles. Traffic patterns, the church’s location, which is distant from freeways, and the geographic scattering of community members’ homes and places of work make midweek gathering time prohibitive.

Early in the process, a deacon of the church wondered why he would want to be part of this project. He already acutely felt shame and guilt about his inability to attend all the church events and Bible studies that he was invited to. With a busy career in the entertainment industry and two young children at home, he needed fewer things to take his time, not more. In this conversation, he bluntly asked whether it would be worth it. What could he be sure he would get from taking part?
The difficulty of that question in regard to discernment is that there is no easy answer. Discernment is not a subject that is learned as much as a relationship to be practiced. There is no guarantee that completing the class will produce a specific outcome for every individual. Rather, the class will equip the participants to create space to listen and empower them to discern God’s voice. The expectation is that each individual will hear from God in ways that are particular to their life and relationship. The hope is that this intimate relational aspect of God’s concern for each participant will also lead to corporate listening by church leadership in ministry decisions and vision.

This project has been designed with this particular deacon in mind. It is planned with a large degree of flexibility to allow individuals to dig more deeply. Alternately, it is structured to allow an individual to take part with a lower level of investment when that is all that is possible. To all participants, there will be opportunities to create space to both learn about and practice discernment wherever space is available.

Linked to this design is an explicit intention to avoid shame and guilt in the process of this class. Part of this intention is driven from Friesen’s needed warning about the ways discernment is open to abuse. Part of it comes from the awareness that hearing God’s voice requires authenticity that is resistant to any level of coercion, even coercion that is not intended. The downside of this explicit intention is that participants who expect external stimulation or leadership to decide levels of involvement may participate at a lower level. The hope is that the flexibility of the class provides room for God to speak and inspire at various levels of participation.
Facilitators

The bulk of the initial facilitation will be borne by the head pastor of the church, the author of this project. The church has two additional ministry staff: a director of children, youth, and discipleship, and a parish associate with primarily mission responsibilities. Both of these staff members play supportive roles in the project. They are available for individual discussion and consultation with participants throughout the project. In addition, they are familiar with the content of the classes and are available to lead any of the Sunday didactic meetings if needed and all of the midweek follow-up meetings. Additionally, the primary audio-visual volunteer from the church is part of the class and oversees the video taping of summary sessions and making them available through the church’s YouTube account.

Creating the Pilot Class

The idea of a class with the Deacon Board participating as the pilot group was conceived nearly a year before the start of the class. The concept of discernment and its application was discussed in both personal and corporate terms. The idea of a voluntary class was discussed. About two months before the creation of the class, a formal invitation was made to the Deacon Board to join as a pilot class. Invitations with the release forms for participation in this project (see Appendix A) were handed out and discussed. These discussions were followed up with phone calls. Invitations were also extended to two former deacons who still play significant roles in the ministries of the board. A final invitation was extended to the church’s key audio-visual volunteer due to
her interest, her connection to present deacon ministries, and the desire to invite her help in the execution of the class.

The original intention was to use dates apart from the official deacon meeting for class time. This plan shifted with unanimous agreement from the Deacon Board for partial participation in the class. Several deacons proposed using the first hour of the monthly board meeting as one of the times of gathering. The difficulty with this decision springs from the typical tone of the deacon meetings; while they are business-like, the class required a more rigorous and vulnerable tone. The benefit of this decision was that it lessened the impact of the class time on the normal routines of the participants. It also created a potential transition for the use of discernment exercises as part of the deacon meetings after the class was completed. The class was not intended as a stand-alone experience, but as inspiration for both personal and corporate practices going forward.

**Welcome and Structure**

Prior to the class, an email was sent to the participants reiterating the purpose of the class, its structure, and its intended flexibility (see Appendix B). It highlighted the dual nature of the class, with practices and gatherings meant to empower both personal and corporate discernment practices. Finally, it gave a schedule for the group and didactic portions of the program and explained the individual portions.

**Assessments**

Also prior to the first class, time was given for participants to fill out a pre-class assessment (see Appendix C). These questions were designed with two purposes. First, they help the participants of the class begin to think deeply upon who they are in relation
to the class content. Second, they help to develop the class to more directly suit the needs of those involved and those who will take the class in the future.

The assessment was designed to measure three items. First, it assesses each participant’s level of understanding of discernment. Second, it evaluates the level of personal experience with hearing the voice of God. Finally, it gauges their experience of corporate discernment.

The assessment proposes statements and asks the participants to respond using a five-point Likert scale. In this way, the participant is able to record degrees of affirmation and comfort with the statements. It also allows for the capture of incremental perceived improvement in specific areas as a result of participation in the class.

The first statement on the assessment is: “I am aware of God's voice speaking into my life.” Answers to this question give the leader an understanding of the level of engagement each participant has with the topic. It also gives an indication of the potential presence or absence of a framework for understanding and identifying discernment experiences.

The second statement on the assessment is: “I am aware of the things in my life that make it hard to hear God’s voice.” The question is designed to probe the level of self-understanding the participant has in regard to hearing God’s voice. A major aspect of discernment, and one of the didactic sessions, focuses on self-awareness, authenticity, and obstacles to discernment.

The third is: “I have practices that help me hear God’s voice.” The fourth is: “I have practices that help me to discern God’s voice from other voices.” The fifth is: “I seek God’s guidance when I have to make a decision.” All three of these questions are
intended to explore the discernment practices each participant uses prior to the class. A goal of the class is to either empower the participants in the use of present discernment practices and/or equip them with additional discernment practices.

The sixth and final statement is: “I have experienced discerning God’s voice with a group of people.” This question is designed to gauge experience in discernment on a group level. All participants of the pilot program have experienced group discernment practices during their tenure on the Deacon Board. The Likert scale answers will indicate the level of understanding and comfort with either these experiences or the connection of these experiences with discernment.

Statements two through six have open-ended follow-up questions. These are intended to deepen the understanding of the class lead about the understanding and experiences of discernment for the participants. They also help each participant to think more deeply upon the topics raised by each statement.

A post-class assessment is given to the participants at the end of the program (see Appendix D). It contains the same questions as the pre-class assessment with additional questions to measure participation and connection to the various aspects of the class. Using the same Likert scale as the pre-class questions, it allows for nuanced and perceived impact in specific areas. The additional questions that measure participation and connection allow for additional analysis where changes in the original Likert scale answers can be measured against the variables of participation and connection to the content.

All assessments given during the project are held in confidence. Hard copies of the assessments are held under lock and key in the church offices. The assessments are
handed out and recorded with numbers rather than names to ensure a secondary level of anonymity while retaining the ability to match pre-class and post-class assessment changes.

**Group Work**

The project consists of both personal and group study over the course of three months. The didactic portions of the class occur within the group meetings. These take place at the church after Sunday worship two times per month. One of these group meetings is during the first hour of the regularly scheduled deacons’ meeting each month. The second group meeting is held in the same space and time during a different Sunday during the month. Scheduling of the second Sunday was plotted around other standing Sunday after-service meetings and other calendar events (for instance, Super Bowl Sunday was avoided). The classes are limited to one hour in duration.

Lunch is provided at the beginning of each class, holding to the practice of present Deacon Board meetings. During the lunch, there is an administrative period during the first class where the particulars of the program are explained. The content in the welcome email (see Appendix B) is handed out and explained with time allowed for questions. The lunch time in subsequent classes provides time for reminders about the various aspects of the program and how they integrate into the purpose of the class. These times of connection also provide space for open discussion about how participants are feeling in the midst of the class.

Each hour-long class is made up of two parts. The first half of the class consists of a didactic session. The second half includes instruction and practice of discernment
techniques. A wide range of tools are introduced over the course of the class to give the
participants flexibility, either to find the tools that work best for them or to inspire them
to discern their own best practices. The discernment techniques that are introduced are
paired with the content in the corresponding didactic session.

An alternate group gathering is available on a weeknight following each Sunday
session. The purpose of this alternate gathering is to give a second opportunity to receive
the didactic content for those who were unable to attend the Sunday gathering. It also
provides another space for other participants to explore and practice the concepts and
practices that were introduced.

A final opportunity to receive the didactic content is made available if both the
Sunday and Thursday opportunities are missed. A short video summation of the teaching
is recorded and made available to class participants as a replacement or follow-up to the
initial group opportunities. The use of this mode of class is discouraged because of its
effect upon the corporate discernment goals of the program. But the video is recorded for
both present participants as well as future use, as the Deacon Board rotates with annual
elections.

**Content of Group Classes**

There are three major didactic sections within the project. They correspond to the
three goals of the class. The first month consists of two classes that are designed to help
the participants understand discernment, with particular attention paid to the role of self-
understanding. The second month’s two classes focus upon personal discernment. They
are designed to give a framework of understanding, scriptural basis, and practices of
personal discernment. The final month’s two classes introduce concepts of corporate discernment.

The key to discernment is not understanding. Understanding simply clears the space to recognize when God speaks, leads, or is present. A key component of the didactic sections is the introduction of practices of discernment that support the content of the session. A brief rundown of the classes and corresponding discernment practices follows.

The first class was scheduled for January 14, 2018. It introduced the topic of discernment through open discussion about the experiences of the participants. The class examined the ways listening to God was both present and avoided in the lives of characters in the Scriptures. Ultimately, discernment was presented as a relational dynamic that relies upon choice. *Lectio Divina* and praying through Scriptures were the discernment practices introduced as a means to choose to clear space and listen for the voice of God.

The second class was scheduled for January 21, 2018. The concept that discernment flows from a loving relationship with God was expanded through discussion about the difficulties of discernment. In particular, the class explored the ways that sin and brokenness make it difficult to hear, process, interpret, and share discernment experiences. The practice of confession was introduced as a means of both discovering the depth of God’s love and remaining in authentic, listening relationship with God.

The third class was scheduled for February 11, 2018. This class discussed the variety of experiences categorized as discernment. Experiencing God’s lead in wisdom, presence, and his still small voice were highlighted. Finally, the class talked about the
ways to determine whether the experience is an experience of God. The role of Scripture and the church were discussed along with subjective markers of experience such as experience, peace, and fruit of the Spirit. After a time of lectio divina, the discernment practices of silence and examen were taught and practiced as a group.

The fourth class was scheduled for February 18, 2018. The group discussed the role of discernment in divine guidance. Particular attention was paid to the role of freedom in relation to the will of God. In his book, Discernment, God's Will & Living Jesus, Larry Warner shares a metaphor he calls the Bullseye and the Field, which was used in class to discuss the ways that God gives both freedom and direction in relationship. The class included instruction and practice of the prayers of indifference and wisdom. The time ended with instruction and practicing the use of imaginative prayer in decision making.

The fifth class was scheduled for March 4, 2018. During this class, the ways that personal discernment related to corporate discernment were discussed. Particular attention was paid to the ways that personal discernment sets the foundation for corporate discernment. The ways that corporate discernment deepens personal discernment was also explored. The idea of covenant and contemplative listening were introduced to practically set boundaries within relationships to create space for corporate discernment.

The sixth and final class was scheduled for March 11, 2018. This class examined practical means of listening corporately. Among topics of conversation were conflict and conflict transformation. Presbyterian decision-making parameters were contrasted with

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consensus decision making. Finally, open discussion regarding application within the Deacon Board was explored.

**Discernment Practices Booklet**

In order to equip and empower the participants with practice of discernment techniques, a Discernment Practices Booklet was distributed to each member (see Appendix E). The booklet contains the twelve discernment practices that are introduced and practiced in the group sections of the program. Each practice is linked to the corresponding goals or didactic sections of the class. There is a brief introduction to the practice followed by concrete steps to aid in practice. The booklets were used during the group practices to familiarize each person with both the booklet and the practices. They also empowered and equipped participants in their personal practice of the discernment techniques outside of the group time.

**Equipping for Personal Discernment Work**

Discernment is intensely personal. It springs from a personal relationship with God. In addition to the Discernment Practices Booklet, the participants of the class are invited to listen to God’s voice in Scripture on a daily basis. The invitation leverages the principles of *lectio divina* and praying through Scripture that are introduced in the first didactic section and make up the first two practices in the Discernment Practices Booklet.

Sixty “Morning Meditations” have been crafted and sent via email (using the email marketing service MailChimp) on a daily basis for the duration of the program. The instructions for the meditations are twofold. First, there is the general direction for setting time boundaries (using an alarm if needed) to keep them in a comfortable time space.
during the devotional. Giving the practitioners a firm end time respects their time and
permits them permission to avoid placing the practice in competition with the rest of their
day. This boundary allows them to enter the space without the stress or worry about how
it affects the rest of their daily tasks. In addition, it protects the space with the assurance
that there will be time enough for the day’s tasks after the meditation. Each email begins
with these words: “Give yourself 5-15 minutes for this morning meditation. In fact, it
may be helpful to set an alarm for the amount of time you have to give so you can honor
your schedule. This will also free you from any guilt you may feel about closing your
time of listening.”

The second list of instructions have been designed to guide their interaction with
the text in the form of lectio divina. The instruction has six steps with a naturally
occurring break after step 3. This break is designed to give a graceful ending for those
with limited time, while also giving room for those with more time to lengthen the time
of devotion.

The first step states: “Spend a moment quieting yourself. Sometimes it helps to
close your eyes. Become aware that God looks upon you lovingly. Ask God to help you
to see what he wants you to see as you engage with him in the Scripture text.” The
purpose of this step is to enter into the time of meditation holistically with an awareness
of the relational focus of the time. The hope is to short-circuit any habit of entering into
the text with only a rational expectation. It also attempts to disabuse the participant of any
relational expectation from God other than love. In the safety of God’s love, it requests
that the time begin with a surrender to God’s lead and revelation. This step hopes to
engender a sense of preparation that creates the space for engaging with God in Scripture.
The second step states: “Slowly read the Scripture. Allow your imagination to set the scene and do not be alarmed to find yourself in it either as a passive bystander or as one of the characters.” The purpose of this step is to invite the participants to engage prayerful imagination as they read the text. Prayerful imagination is in line with the practice of *lectio divina*, which “relies on both the imagination and the intellect,” notes Fr. James Martin in *The Jesuit's Guide to (Almost) Everything*. Imagining the scene often helps the participants to connect the text to their own feelings, experiences, and circumstances. In other words, it creates a bridge for the participants to be able to recognize and hear how God speaks through the text into their own lives.

The third step states: “Reflect on what you have read and experienced by looking at the reflection questions (if provided). Note where the text rang true or spoke into your thoughts, emotions, circumstances, or life.” The purpose of this step is to create space for the participants to pause and acknowledge the places the text has “linked with their lives.” Each day’s text includes questions meant to stir their contemplation on the text to bring these linkages to the fore.

The fourth step gives the practitioners a graceful means of exiting the time of meditation if their time is short. It states: “Here is a good place to end if your time is short.” The purpose of this step is to encourage an accessible practice that avoids shame or guilt as its motivators. This step gives permission to leave the practice in grace with the understanding that the practice is most fruitful when grace dominates the experience.

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4 Ibid., 157.
The fifth step invites those who have more time and need to dig more deeply into what the Holy Spirit has been doing in the time to continue. It states: “Time permitting, read the text again. Make note of any part of the text that struck you in particular. It may be a word, a phrase, a memory or image it inspired. Sit with this for a moment, turning it over in your mind prayerfully.” This step invites the participants to step back into the text using a method of *lectio divina* that focuses on words, images, concepts, or phrases that resonate with them from the passage. It invites them to remain in the space of sensitivity to discern how the Holy Spirit is using the text to speak into their lives. Fr. James Martin speaks of this practice by writing, “Another, slightly different, way of praying *lectio divina* is to dwell on a single word or phrase, and, as Ignatius said, ‘relish’ or ‘savor’ the text. For people who feel uncomfortable with imagery in their prayers, this works very well.”

The final step encourages the participants to prayerfully respond to their experiences. Writing responses can often help people to focus and process their response. It also creates a record of the ways they experienced God that can be returned to later.

The Scripture texts chosen for the “Morning Meditations” highlight God’s communication with people (see Appendix F). In this way, throughout the program, the participants are given scriptural foundation for the information and experiences of discernment. Additionally, the texts are connected to the three major movements within the course of study.

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5 Ibid., 160.
For example, the first group didactic experience highlights the ways they are related to God in love. It sets the first step in discernment upon a self-understanding in relationship to God. Each individual is intimately created, known, gifted, and loved by God. This is the relational foundation of God speaking. God speaks because we are loved, we reflect God’s imprint, and we are made to live in partnership with God in our lives. The “Morning Meditations” for that week connect to and deepen these concepts.

The week begins with meditations upon the two creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 to give space for the participants to consider both the intimacy of the creation account and the uniqueness of humanity in all of Creation. New Testament texts from Ephesians 1:3-4 and Luke 12:6-7 invite the participants to consider the concept of God’s intentionality and intimacy in their lives. Finally, the week ends with instructions on making a spiritual inventory drawn from an exercise found in Henry Blackaby’s *Experiencing God*. These meditations are designed to connect the participants to the beginning place of discernment: God’s love and their relationship with God in Christ.

**Assessment**

While the structure of the class is carefully planned, the content of the project is meant to be flexible. At the beginning of each didactic session during the group meetings, there are open discussion periods meant to assess the effectiveness of the present structure or to inspire changes to make the class more helpful. In addition to private

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conversations with participants, these midstream assessments allow the components of the class to be changed where necessary.

In addition to the ongoing flowing assessment during the program, a post-class assessment is distributed during the last group meeting. This final class contains an extended time of reflections and feedback before the deacon meeting begins. The content of these assessments and conversation are analyzed in the final chapter of this project.

From the assessments and conversations, how the outcome of this class will be applied to subsequent deacons’ meetings will be discussed. The hope is that the Deacon Board will desire to begin each deacon meeting with discernment practices learned in the class. In this way, they can give space for God’s voice, quiet themselves, and ready themselves for corporate discernment during the business of the board.

**Replication Plans**

In addition to the ways that discernment practices become part of the ongoing practice of the Deacon Board, this program is meant to be replicated in the life of BHPC. It will need to be adapted to become part of the ongoing training of the Deacon Board. This will be essential if lasting change to the culture and practices of the leadership of BHPC is going to be accomplished.

The hope is that the teaching would be repeated in the church’s other main leadership board, the Session. After this is accomplished, the class can be modified to be part of the training of new elders and deacons. Additionally, content of the program would need to be adapted for portions of both Session and Deacon Board meetings to encourage practices and readiness for discernment.
Ultimately, the hope is that two to three of the leaders of the church will be identified to continue facilitation of the content and practice going forward. The desire is that the practices and perspectives gained in the project will be replicated each year as new deacons and elders are added to the board. This will allow for continued development of leadership within the church. It will also provide the base of support and execution for the content to be replicated in other committees or groupings of the church.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, practical steps for empowering the deacons at BHPC have been explained. The project is meant to inspire personal discernment practices among the leaders of the church toward the end of encouraging group discernment practices. The success of the project will be measured both by the shift in personal awareness and practice of discernment and corporate practices on the Deacon Board going forward.
CHAPTER 5
IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION OF OUTCOMES

The pilot program of a discernment class developed from this project was run during the first quarter of 2018 with the Deacon Board at Beverly Hills Presbyterian Church. The intention of this chapter is to evaluate the experience and effectiveness of this class. The structure of this evaluation begins from the perspective of the primary leader of the class. An analysis of the project’s strengths and weaknesses led to a further analysis of the opportunities and threats going forward. Four areas are examined: (1) class time that covers the scheduled class times together; (2) outside aids that address the curriculum put together to give people the opportunity to practice and dig deeper into the material outside of class time; (3) make-up opportunities that speak to opportunities for participants who miss scheduled class time to catch up; and (4) next steps that analyze the leadership and replication possibilities.

The perspective of the leader on the first three areas is balanced against the assessments of the deacons who participated in the pilot program. These assessments primarily come from the written assessment forms taken before and after the class.
Additional anecdotal evidence comes from group conversation at the beginning of class times and individual conversations with participants through the course of relationships.

**Class Time**

From the perspective of the leader’s time investment, class time was the focus of the project. It provided opportunity to address each of the project’s three goals: (1) understanding of discernment; (2) personal empowerment and experience with discernment; and (3) corporate empowerment and experience with discernment. The class time was divided into two sections. During the first, the leader presented information and allowed for participants to process discernment both theoretically and by examining their own experiences in light of the teaching. The second section created space for the group to practice various discernment practices together.

The strengths of the class time sprang from the group’s comfort with the didactic process. The times of teaching were fruitful and well received. The conversation was deep with significant sharing of both experiences and perspectives that provided a breadth of illustration and understanding of discernment. The group’s sharing and comfort with each other flowed well into the times of practice. In particular, the times of group *lectio divina*, silence, confession, and prayers for wisdom and indifference resulted in moving shared experiences.

The structuring of the room helped to facilitate these strengths. When the participants entered the room, the set-up was different than that of a typical deacon’s meeting. The focus of the tables was toward a PowerPoint presentation and podium with the tables set up in a half-moon shape. Typically, a deacon meeting takes place at a
conference table. The different set-up created an expectation of a learning experience. Yet the tables also encourage discussion and sharing in response to the teaching.

After the didactic portion of the time together, the entire group moved into the church’s small secondary chapel. The chapel is an intimate space where the lighting and stained glass windows inspire contemplation. This change in venue helped shift the group’s expectations toward the experience of discernment practices.

Despite its strengths, the classes were affected by inconsistent attendance and an over-reliance upon the project leader. The hope that other pastoral staff would be able to provide additional leadership voices in the project never materialized. Part of this was the result of the associate receiving a call to another church midway through the class time. The scope of the project proved to be another weakness. Both the amount of the material and the time between group meetings made it difficult to master. This was exacerbated when the meetings in March were both postponed because of the departure of the associate and the corresponding churchwide celebrations.

Looking forward, this section of the project promises great opportunities. The material needs to be streamlined for future groups. The practices need to be continued on an ongoing basis with the original participants within the deacon meetings. In these ways, a greater portion of the didactic opportunity occurs through practice within the ongoing group setting. It will also allow the voices of the community to be part of the molding influence upon participants rather than a single leader.

Without changes to streamline the content and spread out the voices of the classroom portion, the project will likely prove too unwieldy to replicate. The stress on a single person to create and lead the classes make it difficult for the leader. It is also more
difficult to engender group decision making and connectional dynamics, if it remains dominated by a single voice.

**Outside Aids**

The expectation of this project was that there would be participants with different levels of emotional and time investment. Additionally, the hope was that the group didactic experience would inspire personal practice of discernment exercises outside of group time. Outside aids were developed to empower personal practice while taking into account the variable levels of availability and interest in the group.

Two primary aids were developed: a Discernment Practices booklet and Morning Meditation daily emails. The Discernment Practices booklet (see Appendix E) provided both practical steps and overall explanation about each of the practices introduced in the class. The use of this booklet in the class setting was meant to inspire its active use in time away from the group. The booklet was handed to each participant in the first meeting along with a journal. Participants brought the journal and booklet with them to subsequent meetings. The Morning Meditation daily emails (see Appendix F) were sent to the participants each morning. They were meant to create space for lectio divina on a daily basis with questions that deepened contemplation in the overall project.

In addition to the booklet and emails, the church’s Wednesday night Bible study became an outside aid to the project. Several participants from the class regularly attended the study. During that time, the associate taught and practiced several of the discernment practices learned in class until he departed in March. This was not a planned
aspect of the project, but it materialized out of conversations held within the Wednesday study.

The strengths of these outside aids were primarily in their ability to bridge the time between group classes. Preparation of these aids was largely done before the class began so that they did not present ongoing work for the project leader. They also offered variable options for involvement that met all participants at their level of investment without shaming those with less time to give.

The weakness of the outside aids was that they were structured primarily for individual practice. The Wednesday night Bible study was the exception to this, but a small percentage of the class attended this study (two of the twelve participants). The Morning Message primarily leveraged lectio divina and did not extend to other practices. On average the Morning Message was opened by eight of the twelve participants.\textsuperscript{1} But the usage rate fell throughout the class with over 80 percent of the class opening it during the first two weeks and a little over half the class opening it the last week.\textsuperscript{2} Of course, this does not give direct indication of effectiveness of the devotional. But it does give a sense that it was both useful to the participants and that this usefulness declined for several participants over the course of the class. There is little to no evidence that the Discernment Practices booklet was effective or ineffective outside of class time.

\textsuperscript{1}Usage statistics are available in the reporting function of the email delivery system used for this project: mailchimp.com.

\textsuperscript{2}The usage percentages by week were as follows: week 1 = 81.7%; week 2 = 85%; week 3 = 76.7%; week 4 = 76.7%; week 5 = 73.3%; week 6 = 66.7%; week 7 = 63.3%; week 8 = 56.7%; week 9 = 61.7%; week 10 = 46.7%; week 11 = 58.3%.
Anecdotally, the majority of participants seem to carry the booklet with them to each group class.

The opportunity of the outside aids that were developed is the recognition that portions of classes going forward will be open to the opportunity of additional help outside of group time. They also recognize that discernment is a practice that develops over time, in intimacy that includes personal time and as part of practice. These aids make the practical resources of the class available to participants with an open sense of their usefulness and empowerment in individuals lives. They attempt to meet the variable needs and investment found in any group. But the threat to this is that it projects an individualistic sense to discernment that erodes the ultimate goal of discerning together as church leadership.

**Follow-Up Options**

Based upon the overall worship and board attendance patterns of the church, the expectation was that there would not be consistent attendance during the project. This expectation was immediately met when two participants let me know that they had travel plans during the time of the course. Four participants were able to attend all six training sessions.

Much of the information in the training sessions built upon previous lessons. As a result, two ways were developed to allow participants to catch up on missed classes. The first was the development of follow-up classes on Thursday evenings. These would be designed to give participants who missed class a chance to receive the teaching. It would also give other participants a chance to dig more deeply into the practices or information
taught. This would be the ideal form for participants to make up for lost classes. The learning would allow for a conversational group dynamic that is the bedrock of corporate discernment. When these make-up classes were offered, no one expressed interest, and ultimately, no one ever attended one.

The second means of follow-up was the development of short training videos. After each class, the project leader would video-record the content of the lesson and the discernment practices taught. These videos were uploaded to the church’s YouTube account and emailed directly to the class. The strength of these videos is that it extended an opportunity for participants to catch up on content with a minimal investment of time. The teaching in the videos was able to reflect the corporate wisdom revealed in the group setting. But the weakness of this approach is that it did not give opportunity for the participant to ask questions or benefit from the group dynamic. It also could not replicate the group exercise of discernment practices.

The opportunity the videos provide is in the production of a didactic tool that can be used in following classes with minimal additional investment by the project leader. Potentially, if not problematically, the videos can be used for teaching for succeeding classes. The threat is that this material becomes further removed from the group dynamic of the class. Additionally, the medium encourages an individualistic experience of discernment and misses the potential of learning as a group.

Next Steps

The hope for this pilot program is that it would prove to be replicable in other places in the church. The natural place for the program to be repeated is within the
The church’s governing board of elders. Other ministry units such as the Men’s Ministry, Women’s Ministry, and Young Adult Ministries could also prove to be places open to discernment training. This replication would be dependent upon the efficiency or marketability of the material and the development of leaders.

The hope of this project was that during the pilot program, certain participants within the class would be identified as leaders. These potential leaders would be mentored so that the discernment practices would become part of each deacon meeting. Newly elected deacons would be mentored and taught by existing deacons, allowing the practices to become part of the board’s discernment ethos. Thus, each group would continue to develop its practice and understanding of discernment. Additionally, leaders from the pilot and succeeding programs would be able to take part in the replication of the training within other areas of the church. Support of church staff would be necessary to support and mentor these potential lay leaders.

The first weakness in this plan was the lack of leadership. Perhaps, more time is needed to develop the comfort level to step into a leadership role. A second weakness that is connected to the lack of leadership is that the material presented was unwieldy. There is simply too much information over too long a period of time.

While it is apparent that the program as it is presently stated is not likely to be replicated, there are opportunities going forward. Continual work with the Deacon Board using these practices within the work of the board might be important for leadership development to occur. Perhaps, the incubation period of discernment practices is longer than three months and is best developed through continual practice. Additionally, the
lessons learned during this pilot program need to be applied to develop a more streamlined and efficient curriculum.

The greatest threat against the replication of this project is the cost of it upon the single project leader. In its present form, it is a considerable weight to bear. In a similar vein, the second threat to the project would be to ignore the need to develop additional leadership voices. To continue to drive the project without the development of leaders would lessen its impact and sustainability within the church.

**Participant Assessments on Four Areas**

Eight of the twelve participants returned the Discernment Class post-assessments at the point of writing. Evaluation of the classes, outside aids, and make-up opportunities are made from the participation questions, valuation questions, and open-ended responses in these assessments. Then a comparison of the six pre-assessment questions with their after-class iteration provide an evaluation of the overall goals of the class: (1) to help the leaders of BHPC to understand discernment; (2) to equip participants with practices and tools for personal discernment; and (3) to move the participants into the practice of corporate discernment.

Baseline participation in this project depended upon participation in class time. Four of the twelve participants attended every class. Five attended five classes. The remaining three participants attended four, three, and two classes respectively. Participants have been divided into three tiers based upon class participation and follow-up. Tier 1 participants made all class times. Several from this group made use of follow-up opportunities for additional information. As one Tier 1 participant observed, the
videos “clarified aspects” for him. Tier 2 participants missed class time but were able to make use of follow-up opportunities covering all classes missed. Tier 3 participants missed classes and were unable to make up all missed classes. The assessments collected came from participants from all three tiers: three of the four Tier 1 participants, three of the six Tier 2 participants, and one of the two Tier 3 participants. From these numbers, it is safe to infer that the assessments are distributed across the various participation levels. Resulting evaluation allows for experiences and opinions across these levels.

The participant assessment of the class time was positive. All eight assessments chose the first two classes on understanding ourselves in discernment as being among the most helpful things in the project. The relative helpfulness of the classes declined from that point with six respondents choosing the second two classes on personal discernment among the helpful aspects of the class, and five choosing the final two classes on group discernment. These numbers are confirmed by the comments on the assessments and in feedback during the classes. In class time feedback, the general response throughout noted that the practices and information increased in complexity through the class, making it more difficult to master. One participant noted in response to experiences of group discernment in the last section: “I think we need more time together.”

The participant assessment of the outside aids was mixed. More than half of the respondents testified to using the daily Morning Meditations. Two admitted to the use being sporadic, while one admitted to not having time for them at all. Nevertheless, those who made use of them found them to be beneficial to their practice of discernment and engagement with the material. One participant wrote that the Morning Meditations helped him to become “more focused and disciplined.” Another noted that he experienced them
to be “so timely to my spiritual needs that I felt as if they were individually crafted for me.”

Only two of the eight respondents noted that they used the Discernment Practices booklet outside of class. Multiple participants attested to its helpfulness within the class time. One participant bluntly noted, “I have not had the opportunity to use it outside of class, yet.”

Participant assessment of follow-up options was mixed. Despite a few people noting how positive the Thursday follow-up sessions were, no one attended any. The videos were roundly praised by those who needed them in place of class time. One participant noted, “Videos were helpful. Very calming in a hectic week.” They were also praised by those who merely used them for review. One participant stated, “Videos were extremely helpful. I was able to review sections and reinforce concepts.” But the weaknesses of the videos were also noted. One participant wrote, “Videos were helpful, but would prefer in person for questions and other viewpoints.” Ultimately, the videos were appreciated by the participants because it allowed for flexibility with those who missed classes and additional resources for those with the time and inclination to pursue them. Even so, the videos are a lesser option than the experience of group conversation in class time.

The spread of opinion on each of these areas is not surprising. The follow-up and outside aid tools were created to allow for variable experiences based upon availability, personality, and interest level. The resulting information from the class time is more significant. It seems to confirm the difficulty in learning the more complex issues of
personal and group discernment. Perhaps these topics need to be introduced with an expectation that they will be practiced over time in a group setting.

**Participant Assessments on Project Goals**

The stated goals of this project were: (1) to help the leaders of BHPC to understand discernment; (2) to equip participants with practices and tools for personal discernment; and (3) to move the participants into the practice of corporate discernment. Apart from testing participants’ competency (which is beyond the scope of this project), the only way to measure these goals is through subjective means. The primary method used was through a set of questions that were asked to the participants both before and after the project. Variance in their answers was examined to see if they indicate movement toward the project goals. A secondary method is listening to anecdotal evidence from conversations and open-ended questions on the assessments.

The first two questions in the assessment were designed to measure the first goal—the participants’ understanding of discernment. Variance between the before and after assessments in the responses to the first question, “I am aware of God’s voice speaking into my life,” show an increased understanding. The scale was set with 1.0 meaning, “I always am aware of God’s voice,” and 5.0 as “I never am aware of God’s voice.” The pre-class answers were weighted toward a neutral 3.0. The post-class average answer was 2.4.³

³ Where there was difference, the average answers compared were between the pre- and post-class answers from the eight participants who completed both.
The response to the second question seemed to bear the opposite conclusion. Where pre-class answers averaged 1.875, post-class answers averaged 2.5. Thus, the result of the class was a decline in understanding of the things in life that make it hard to hear God’s voice. This information is further confused by deeper analysis. One participant whose self-understanding dropped from a 2 to a 4 clearly identified things that made hearing God’s voice difficult. This person then wrote how the things learned in the class affected that awareness. He wrote that the things that make it hard to hear God’s voice are, “Biggest is myself. First, learning to strip the ego and let God’s voice in. Prayer for Indifference and Silence helps.”

The next three questions were designed to evaluate the way the project equipped participants with practices and tools for discernment. Each of these questions showed a slight improvement in the class average. In response to the statement, “I have practices that help me hear God’s voice,” the answer improved from an average of 3.125 to 2.875. The anecdotal evidence showed the direct influence of the project with several participants naming the practices learned in class. One participant wrote, “The different practices we learned in class.” Others noted the particular effect of lectio divina. But two other participants wrote elaborate answers that were nearly identical to their answers before taking the class and were without reference to anything learned in the class. The responses to the fourth and fifth questions similarly showed a slight improvement in the answer average.

The final question was meant to evaluate the final goal of the project. It would assess the participants’ understanding of and experience in group discernment. The average response of the group showed that their experience with group discernment
improved from 2.375 to 1.875. The written responses to this question were more specific. Some of the pre-class answers attempted to define what was necessary for group discernment with answers like: “having the Holy Spirit is important” and “the reassurance when more than one person is hearing the same thing.” The post-class answers became less conceptual and instead noted times in the participants’ lives when they had experienced group discernment. Multiple participants talked about an experience starting a Community Bible Study at our church. Another directly referenced the practices in the class. The answers show a greater practical understanding of what group discernment is. After the class, they were able to recognize and to identify their own experiences of group discernment.

Overall, the assessments showed movement toward the goals of the project. The participants in the class achieved a greater understanding of discernment, exposure (if not empowerment) in discernment practices, and equipping toward group discernment. Despite this improvement, the objective measurement of those gains was lower than expected, both in shifts in assessment numbers and in written responses.

**Conclusion**

The outcome of the project was measured in two primary areas. An assessment of the practice and outworking of the project was mixed. The content and structure of the classes, follow-up, and outside aids were positive. But the overall project was too cumbersome. It needs to be streamlined for reproducibility because of the stress placed upon the class leader and the amount of time required of the participants. In addition to this streamlining of classroom portion, the timeframe for adoption of that material needs
to be longer. An assessment of the projects goals is similarly mixed. Each of the project’s three goals were positively addressed. Even so, there is reason to believe that they can be addressed better.

Before reproducing this class, further study needs to be done. The experience for the present Deacon Board should be considered ongoing. Intentional use of discernment practices in subsequent deacon meetings will provide opportunity for lengthening the practical portion of the project. It will also provide space and practice for group discernment practices to be adopted. Perhaps this will allow the participants to grow in their experience of group and personal discernment.

In conjunction with an increased practical application period, the content of the classes needs to be streamlined and simplified for future iterations of the class. The material needs to be presented more simply and in a shorter time frame. For church governing boards, their normal meeting times can become places of extended application. For church ministry groups, other opportunities for extended application will need to be explored. Ultimately, the project is worth continuing with the present group, then refining and reproducing it for future use.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This project began with an awareness of the complexity of living the Christian faith in our present world. When this awareness is applied to a particular locale of the city of Beverly Hills within the greater metropolitan area of Los Angeles, the particularities of that complexity are magnified. When the leadership of BHPC, with the characteristics of their lives, struggles, and faith are imagined in this complexity, the result is overwhelming.

There is much to be gained by looking to the past in order to make a way through present complexity. The church, denomination, and its theological forbearers have much to offer BHPC and its leadership. This has been apparent in this study as it has examined practices and thought patterns that are centuries and millennia old. Nevertheless, the past is unable to give answers to the present complexity. Questions are being asked in different ways. Diversity and plurality are presented to the urban context of Beverly Hills and Los Angeles with new intricacy. Instead of direct answers, this project seeks methods. In particular, it asks how the church in Beverly Hills can listen to how God would have it be in the midst of this complexity.

It is potentially dangerous ground to attempt to discern the voice of God. People get nervous that it is another way of saying that the truth we know is not good enough anymore. Others fear it is a power move to claim divine mandate upon parochial designs. The truth is that it is potentially both of those things. In the past, it has often been those things. From the perspective of many of the neighbors of BHPC, Christianity is exactly those things.
This project strives for more than that. It asks for intimacy of faith and leadership that will face the complexity of now with belief that we serve a God who loves, guides, and directs. God does not just love, guide, and direct in generality, but he does so in the particular complexity wherever his children happen to be. This project is designed to be discontent with anything but listening to how God is directing his church now.

Much has been learned on the journey of this project. If it began with an awareness of the complexity of the world, it has discovered the complexity of listening for God’s voice. It is not the kind of thing one seeks expecting to stay as one is.

The first step in seeking God’s voice begins with listening to God speak into the lives of the hearer. Discernment begins with self-understanding mixed with God understanding. The hearer of God discovers the love of God directly and personally. This love of God forces faith. It also forces confession. Part of receiving the word of God is becoming aware of how frail and fraught humans are in receiving. Before God begins to speak into the complexity of the world, God always begins speaking into the complexity of his children.

Perhaps this has been the most fruitful part of this journey. It was the part of the class that most radically confronted the project leader and the participants. And it needs to be. The most daunting realization from this journey has been that discernment is not easy. It takes more than a three-month class, no matter how many outside aids are developed. It occurs as people step deeper into hearing. It occurs as people allow their rough edges to be worn by God’s holy scouring. It is the way that God prepares in his people the authenticity needed to hear God and not what people want God to be.
No matter how daunting the task may seem, the alternate tension in discernment is that it is also wholly accessible. God wants to communicate his voice, his presence, his love, his direction, and his now to his people. God does not wait until people are holy. Rather, God speaks. This project set about to step into the accessibility of discernment while also being confronted with the enormity of the task.

The entry point of this project into the lives of the leadership of BHPC is understanding. The first goal of the project was to open the participants to a mystical understanding of life. In dialogical and rational methods that the church knows well and is comfortable with, this project began by creating a framework of understanding life where God speaks. The expectation is that this understanding does not just open participants to potential new experiences, but helps them recognize the ways that God has already been speaking to them. It is designed to help them recognize the ways that God has been present, guiding, and leading them. Unfortunately, this understanding both clarifies and muddles things. It makes sense of faith but introduces them to the complexity of discernment.

The entirety of this project operates at the entry point of understanding. The content of the material is designed to move from introduction to equipping. Ultimately, discernment cannot be given to a person. It must be practiced. In practicing, it is received not from a class but from interaction with God.

The class covers a whole lot of material. It begins by speaking about who God is and then who we are. It talks about the dangers and frayed edges of personal discernment. Participants are equipped to know the things that ground discerners: Scripture, Church, and experience. They are taught a shot-gun blast of discernment practices. Perhaps this is
a weakness. But it is a necessary weakness. The idea is not that each participant must learn and master each practice. Rather, the understanding is that the variety of practices exist because different practices appeal to and grasp different people.

To try to grasp all of the practices is impossible. But it is freeing to see a person grasp one. During the pilot program of this project, one of the participants immediately connected with the practice of *lectio divina*. Each time we practiced as a group, he responded deeply. He began to use the practice during the daily Morning Meditation emails. Each time he saw me, he would say, “Andrew, this changes everything. Before I would read to find out stuff. Now I listen to hear God.” It is not surprising that this individual constantly presses for this project to be replicated throughout the church.

The place that this project seemed to grind to a halt was during its transition to group discernment. It is hard enough to quiet down all of the noise around an individual to hear God speak, but to try to do that in a group seems impossible. But to refuse to move in this step is to thwart the entire purpose of the project. The project seeks to empower the church to hear God speak. In order for that to happen, BHPC needs to learn to listen as the church—together.

Perhaps the difficulty of group discernment is that it needs to be practiced. Practicing in a group happens less frequently than does individual discernment. One of the realizations from this project is that it takes longer than three months to learn discernment. If this is true for individuals, it is even truer for a group. From that perspective, three months of class time is not enough. There needs to be intentionality to discern together long after the class portion is finished.
The pilot program for this project began with one of the two leadership boards at BHPC. The Deacon Board specializes in caring ministries within the church. Its members are particularly interested in how God might guide and direct them to care and to serve. Ultimately, the results of the class seem mixed. On one hand, it is apparent to everyone on the board that they are not there yet. They struggle with understanding group discernment. They are not even really sure they can recognize God’s voice personally all of the time. But they are equally aware that they are so much further than when they started. They are energized by the ways they have experienced God together in the class times, the practice times, and the times they are now recognizing God was speaking to them all along.

Moving forward at the end of this pilot program requires more work. On one hand, the participants from the Deacon Board need continual shepherding in what they have learned and experienced. They are well placed for this. As a group, they continue to meet once a month to go about the business of being deacons. During this time, they will covenant to practice, to listen, and to discern together. The hope is that this will become part of the life blood of the group and of the individuals. The hope is that they will begin to exist from a new understanding of God speaking into life.

On the other hand, the project needs to be further refined before it is replicated. Generally speaking, it needs to be streamlined. This streamlining needs to take into account the lessons learned about offering a variable experience through outside aids and follow-up options. Some of these are already developed and will need just a little development to be reused. It also needs to solve the tension between the need for a shorter didactic run and space for longer practical application. In addition to these general
lessons, the project needs to be flexible in its specific application. Its application to the board of elders will be different from its application to the church’s young adult ministry.

Perhaps it is not surprising that a project which seeks to open the door for discernment would need continual discernment along the way. While the dissertation portion of this project has come to a point of conclusion, the journey of BHPC with discernment has only just begun. The conclusion of this doctoral project is hopefully only the beginning of listening for God’s voice in the complexity of Beverly Hills.
January 14, 2018
Subject: Release Form for Participation in DMin Project

Dear member of the Deacon Board,

My name is Andrew Eagles. I am doing a study to try to find out more about the role of spiritual discernment in the lives of leadership at Beverly Hills Presbyterian Church. I will explain the project to you in detail.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to take part in a series of anonymous surveys to set a baseline understanding of the present spiritual discernment practices and experiences in your personal life, in your leadership duties on the Deacon Board, and in the lives and leadership duties of other participants from the Board. You will also agree to go through a three-month period of training and discipling which will focus upon discerning the lead of God through prayer, study of Scripture, and spiritual disciplines. The training should increase your understanding of the ways that God communicates into our lives. It will also empower you in the practice of listening and discernment of the things heard. Some of the practice and study will need to be done in personal time of prayer and devotion. We will also give space for the participants to gather as a group for study, conversation, and practice that I will lead. At the end of the three-month period, a final round of surveys will be taken to determine the ways the study impacted you and the Deacon Board.

You can ask questions about the study at any time. Also, if you decide you don’t want to finish, you can stop whenever you want. There are no right or wrong answers because this is not a test.

Participation will require a level of participation in exercises designed to empower you to learn to recognize and discern God’s lead in your life. The expectation is that you will be
able to take part in a portion of the group opportunities. Although these group opportunities will be designed with an awareness of the busyness and travel difficulties of Los Angeles. Otherwise, there are no other expected discomforts expected as a result of participation.

As a result of participation in this study, you will be introduced to practices that will deepen your ability to recognize the lead of God in your life. These practices will also shift how we operate together as a Deacon Board in leadership at Beverly Hills Presbyterian church.

Throughout your participation in this study, your confidentiality will be maintained in all data collected. No one else will know if you were in this study and no one else can find out what answers you gave. We will keep all the records for this study without reference to the identity of participants. Any records that can connect you by name to the records will be maintained under lock and key in my office.

Remember, you can ask any questions you may have about this study. If you have a question later that you didn’t think of now, you can call me on my cell phone at (626) 260-047, at the office at (310)271-5195, or ask me next time.

Signing your name at the bottom of this form means that you have read or listened to what it says and you understand it. Signing this form also means that you agree to participate in this study and your questions have been answered. You will be given a copy of this form after you have signed it.

______________________________
Signature of Participant

______________________________
Typed/printed Name

______________________________
Date

______________________________
Signature of Leader

______________________________
Rev. Andrew Eagles

______________________________
Typed/printed Name

______________________________
Date
APPENDIX B

Welcome Email about Discernment Class

Discernment Class Welcome!

I wanted to welcome you to the leadership class on discernment. It begins this Sunday during the first hour of our regularly scheduled Deacons Meeting.

The purpose of the class is to empower us individually and as a group to recognize the leading of God. The potential is to shift us from being preoccupied with trying to do enough for everyone (including God)... to be freed to be part of what God has created us to be about. We are all busy. Discernment is the key to learning how to use the finite time that we have in ways that are wise and God-directed in our work, home, and ministry.

In this email, I want to give you a general layout of the class. It is designed with two areas of practice: group and personal time. It is also designed to be flexible. There are opportunities to both dig more deeply or participate with less time commitment. God knows who you are, the things you have to do, and the time you have to give. He will meet you wherever and whenever you can turn your eyes to him without asking you to do more than you are able to do.
Basic Training will take place in two group meetings per month, after 2nd Service, in the library, for approximately one hour (lunch will be provided).

Meeting Dates:
Jan. 14th*
Jan. 21st
Feb. 11th*
Feb. 18th
Mar. 4th
Mar. 11th*
Apr. 8th/15th*

* regular Deacon meeting dates

Additionally, each Thursdays evening after the Sunday meeting there will be time to gather for those who missed the Sunday or who wish to dig more deeply into what was discussed.

At its core, discernment springs from one's relationship with God. Two helps have been created to lead and inspire personal discernment practice.

Morning Meditations - an emailed devotional sent each morning; designed as quick, daily invitation to spend time listening with Scripture passages linked to the most recent Sunday training.

Discernment Practices Manual - a booklet of practices that will be discussed in Sunday Training; designed to make discernment practices accessible and understandable.

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You are receiving this email as part of the Discernment Training of the Deacons at Beverly Hills Presbyterian Church.

Our mailing address is:
Beverly Hills Presbyterian Church
505 N. Rodeo Dr.
Beverly Hills, California 90210

Add us to your address book

Want to change how you receive these emails? You can update your preferences or unsubscribe from this list.
APPENDIX C

Pre-Class Assessments

Discernment Class Pre-Assessment

These questions are designed with two things in mind. First, they are designed to help the participants of the class begin to think deeply upon who they are in relation to what the class will cover. Second, they will help to develop the class to more directly suit the needs of those involved and those who will take the class in the future.

1. I am aware of God's voice speaking into my life.

2. I am aware of the things in my life that make it hard to hear God's voice. If so, what are they?

3. I have practices that help me hear God's voice. If so, what are they?

4. I have practices that help me to discern God's voice from other voices. If so, what are they?

(Survey Scale: 1 = Always; 3 = Sometimes; 5 = Never)
5. I seek God's guidance when I have to make a decision. If so, what are they?

6. I have experienced discerning God's voice with a group of people. If so, what are they?
APPENDIX D

Post-Class Assessments

Discernment Class Post-Assessment

These questions are designed with two things in mind. First, they are designed to help the participants of the class reflect upon how this class affected their understanding of discernment. Second, they will help to develop future classes to more directly suit the needs of those involved.

Administrative Questions

Participation:
How many classes did you take part in? If you can remember, which ones?

Were you able to make up missed classes through the video follow-ups? If so, which ones?

Were the videos helpful? Describe the experience.

Were you able to make use of the daily Morning Mediations? Describe the experience.

Did you use the Practices for Discernment Manual outside of class? Describe the experience.

Valuation:
Which aspects of the project were helpful for you? (Mark and rank as many as were helpful).

___ First two classes on understanding ourselves in discernment
___ Second two classes on personal discernment
___ Third two classes on group discernment
___ Monday Mediations
___ Discernment Practices Manual
___ Thursday Follow-up meetings
___ Video back-up of teachings
___ Other:
Which aspects of the project were most difficult for you?
___ First two classes on understanding ourselves in discernment
___ Second two classes on personal discernment
___ Third two classes on group discernment
___ Monday Mediations
___ Discernment Practices Manual
___ Thursday Follow-up meetings
___ Video back-up of teachings
___ Other:

Follow-up from Pre-Class Assessment:

(Survey Scale:
1 = Always;
3 = Sometimes;
5 = Never)

1. I am aware of God's voice speaking into my life. 1 2 3 4 5
2. I am aware of the things in my life that make hearing God's voice difficult.
   If so, what are they? 1 2 3 4 5

3. I have practices that help me hear God's voice.
   If so, what are they? 1 2 3 4 5

4. I have practices that help me to discern God's voice from other voices.
   If so, what are they? 1 2 3 4 5
5. I seek God's guidance when I have to make a decision.
   If so, in what ways?

6. I have experienced discerning God's voice with a group of people.
   If so, how did it work?
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INTRODUCTION

Discernment is a product of relationship with the Living God. It is dependent upon a growing awareness of who God is and who we are in connection to God. This manual is meant to guide the reader in practices that create space to experience relationship with God.

The practices are recorded in three movements that correspond to the teachings in the Discernment Class. The first section highlights practices that deepen understanding of our relationship with God. The second section emphasizes practices meant to clear space to hear God speak to individuals. The third section introduces practices meant to aid in discernment within group settings.

Each practice has an introduction or description followed by a number of steps. These steps are not meant to be rules. They are guides borrowed from the experiences of others that can prove helpful in developing habits of listening and recognizing the voice of God. But everyone who embarks on a journey of seeking God’s voice can expect that God already knows how best to meet them along the way.
SECTION ONE

The practices in this section are designed to help you to know yourself as God knows you. The first two practices are designed to help you listen to God in Scripture so that you can begin to believe how valuable you are to God. The third practice is designed to acknowledge our need for grace and God’s desire to bring us healing, forgiveness, and peace.

LECTIO DIVINA

Lectio Divina is a method of Scripture study that traces back to the 3rd century. It is a useful practice because it teaches us to engage with Scripture in ways that are different from the ways we typically read and study material. Typically, we study with an analytical approach. What does the text say? How does it impact my life or my knowledge base? How can I apply it? But Lectio invites us into a relational posture in reading Scripture. The expectation is that God is near to us and meets us in the text. So, the time becomes as much about connection as information, about heart as head, and encountering God directly instead of learning about God.

There are four basic movements to Lectio Divina: read, reflect, respond, and contemplate. Lectio makes use of imagination while reading. This is often a difficult step for us because we are used to distrusting our imagination. It takes faith to entrust your imagination to the Living God. Often, I find it helpful to invite God to use or be part of my imagination as I prepare to practice Lectio Divina.

THE PRACTICE OF LECTIO DIVINA

Prepare by quieting yourself before the Lord, to the best of your ability. It can be helpful to close your eyes and imagine yourself in the loving presence of God. As worries and thoughts bubble to the surface, calmly take them one at a time and place them at Jesus’ feet. He will hold them during the time of prayer. If they are worthy of your time after, he will ensure that you pick them up again.

Choose a text of Scripture. It does not need to be long. The point of Lectio is not the amount of text read but the depth of relational connection with God through the text.

Read the text slowly. Here I practice two different variants.

- At times I listen to hear words or phrases from the text that strike me as significant. I then hold onto them and turn them over prayerfully in my mind. In other words, I meditate upon those words. As I meditate, I listen to the ways the Holy Spirit deepens their meaning or connects them to ideas, images, or memories.
- At other times, particularly if the text is a narrative or story, I imagine myself in the text. I allow my imagination to engage my emotions and senses. How would I be feeling? What would the sound of the waves be like or the crunch of the sand
under my feet? Often, I will place myself into the shoes of one of the characters of
the narrative. Sometimes I will picture myself as an outside observer. The story
begins to come alive for me and begins to speak into my emotions, my
experiences, and my life.

Reflect upon the things you are hearing from the text or from the presence of God who
meets you in the text.

Respond in prayer. Be present to the Holy Spirit as the text is being opened to you. Pray.
Be thankful, worshipful, questioning, wondering, or whatever seems appropriate.

Contemplate. Simply rest in the experience and connection. Rest in God. Allow your
relationship to deepen by leaning into God in trust. Enjoy God’s presence.

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

Similar to Lectio Divina, praying Scripture is a practice that moves Scripture study from
being simply a rational exercise to one that is holistic. It personalizes Scripture and
receives it as communication between the Living God and you. The practice is as simple
as it sounds. It involves using the words of Scripture to become your words spoken to
God. It can also be a way of allowing the words of Scripture to be spoken to you. Another
way this can be done is by placing your name in Scripture to personalize the promises
and words to you. The faith leap required to pray the Scriptures is the belief that God
loves you and that the promises and words of Scripture are for you.

THE PRACTICE OF PRAYING SCRIPTURE

Prepare by quieting yourself before the Lord, to the best of your ability. It can be helpful
to close your eyes and imagine yourself in the loving presence of God. As worries and
thoughts bubble to the surface, calmly take them one at a time and place them at Jesus’
feet. He will hold them during the time of prayer. If they are worthy of your time after, he
will ensure that you pick them up again.

Choose a Scripture passage or simply use the one you happen to be reading and feel led
to pray.

Pray by taking the words of Scripture and make them your prayer to God. By doing so,
you own the words and place yourself within the Scriptures. To practice this approach, a
good verse is Ephesians 3:14-21. It can also be helpful to personalize the Scriptures as
God’s words to you. Simply replace the recipient of the words with your name. Try this
with Jeremiah 29:10-14 or Isaiah 43:1-7. The practices are designed to help you believe
that God speaks his love and promises to you.
PRAYER OF CONFESSION

The prayer of confession is likely the most difficult and the most necessary practice for discernment. We tend to deal with our brokenness and sin by covering it with excuses, denial, blame shifting, or any other means so that we do not have to carry it ourselves. There is something healthy about that because the truth is that we cannot carry it ourselves. But it is not the healthiest way to deal with brokenness. The faith step necessary for confession is believing that God loves you as you are... even in your brokenness (see Ephesians 2:4-5, if you won’t take my word for it) and that he will carry it for you. Better, he will heal you, cleanse you, forgive you, and make you whole!

I like to think of confession as inviting Jesus in. It is not always a moral reckoning as much as a relational action to allow Jesus to know my vulnerability. In this way, I can invite him into the places where I’m not sure I’m broken or where I’m not sure I’ve messed up. I can trust him to meet me in that place.

A final note, the prayer of confession is meant to be repeated. It is not a practice done once and then you can’t do it again for that same issue. The Christian life is not about perfection but about being able to dust ourselves off and get up again each time we fall. Remember that the apostle John tells us that Jesus is faithful and forgives every time we come to him and invite him into our pain, our brokenness, our messiness, or our sin (1 John 1:9)!

THE PRACTICE OF CONFESSION

Ask Jesus for help! If you know what you want to confess, ask him for the courage to be vulnerable with him. Ask him to reassure you of his love... to let you see his compassion and gentleness. If you have an idea but can’t put your finger on it, ask the Holy Spirit to search your heart, your life, and your thoughts and to raise before you the things you need to open before God.

Remember the difference between conviction and shame. Shame accuses you of your faults with the desire to destroy you. God does not move in shame. If you are covered with shame, rebuke it in the name of Jesus. Simply say, “Jesus, I know you do not move in shame, so I ask that you remove it from me. I do not want to listen to any voice except for yours. I trust you. In the name of Jesus, shame, leave me!”

God does move in conviction. Over time you will begin to recognize the touch of Jesus in conviction. Conviction does not accuse or condemn. Instead it conveys hope and love. Certainly conviction is serious and it can be urgent but it always expresses love. It waits for you to turn toward God and will not impose upon you. Conviction is invitation.

Invite Jesus into your pain. If this is difficult or it is hard to get here, ask Jesus for help. You can pray the Scripture in Mark 9:24, “I believe, help my unbelief!”
Repent. Confess your part in the pain, the brokenness, the messiness, or the sin. Even if it is just your reaction to the pain. Tell Jesus you are sorry, and you want to trust him with it instead.

Forgive. Now forgive anyone else who is connected to your confession. To the best of your ability, let go of whatever you are holding. This is an action that may have to be done multiple times before you get to the heart of forgiveness. It can be like peeling an onion. There may be many layers to the forgiveness.

Acknowledge God’s grace. Thank God and receive his forgiveness and love.

Make Amends. If necessary, spread the grace of forgiveness to those connected to your confession. Apologize where apology is needed. Forgive where it is relationally appropriate to speak forgiveness, with awareness of avoiding new pain in a relationship where forgiveness may not be welcome.
SECTION TWO

The practices in this section are designed to create space for discernment, help you hear God speak, and recognize God’s presence.

SILENCE

The practice of silence is often useful in preparation for discernment. The basic premise is that God is often speaking to us, but we are too busy to listen. So silence creates space. But practically, silence helps us more by teaching us to deal with distraction and showing us how to orient ourselves toward God.

THE PRACTICE OF SILENCE

Prepare. I find it is often good to enter into silence with a reminder that it is not my doing that matters, but God’s sovereignty. Psalm 46:10 is helpful. In it, God says to us, “Be still and know that I am God.”

Get into a comfortable space. If you intend to practice silence for any duration over a minute, it can be helpful to limit distractions. Shut a door or silence a cell phone.

Focus on God. Listen. You are more likely to hear other things than God’s voice in silence. Distracting thoughts will rush in and disrupt your attempt at being still before God. The best thing to do is to not take the bait. Instead, move your mind from the distractions without trying to solve anything or castigate yourself. Return your focus to God.

When practicing silence, you may not feel or hear anything. In faith, trust that God is still present. In his book, Listening to God in Times of Choice, Gordon Smith writes, “In the silence, attend to God. There is no agenda; there is nothing we need to say to God. We can comfortably enjoy God’s presence and delight, through faith, in the reality of God’s love. In silence we can experience what is described in 1 Peter 1:8: ‘Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.’” I find these words to be helpful.
PRAYER FOR INDIFFERENCE

With regard to discernment, indifference does not mean lack of interest. Rather it speaks to a pointed focus of interest upon the heart of God. It is a request for the grace to put all other things into proper perspective. It stems from a general acknowledgment that we are broken and influenced by many things in life. The prayer for indifference asks God to help us recognize the difference between the influences that are from God and the ones that are not. The request is to help us let go of anything that keeps us from God’s love and God’s best for us. Indifference is freedom to hear and respond to God’s heart in any situation or circumstance. The faith step of the prayer for indifference is believing that God loves us, will care for us (and our worries), and knows best what we need to focus on in life.

THE PRACTICE OF THE PRAYER FOR INDIFFERENCE

Prepare by quieting yourself before the Lord, to the best of your ability. It can be helpful to close your eyes and imagine yourself in the loving presence of God.

Ask God for indifference to all that is not his best for you. A famous prayer of indifference is from Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, “Let my hearts be broken by the things that break the heart of God.” I typically add to these words a request for God to show me places in my life that need to be submitted or confessed so that nothing else has a hold on my heart.

Listen. Allow the Holy Spirit to bring conviction.

Confess. Invite Jesus into the places we need indifference. State that your desire (however conflicted) is for Jesus to be Lord of your life and nothing else. To the best of your ability, submit any place of conviction to Jesus in prayer. But remember that holy indifference is not an action of the will as much as an action of God shaping us. The extent of our willpower is to lay hold of what God raises to our awareness and to invite Jesus to be Lord of our lives.
PRAYER FOR WISDOM

In James 1:5, the Scripture writer bluntly tells us to ask God for wisdom. He writes, “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.” The step of faith in the prayer for wisdom is letting go of the sense of control that comes from certainty and opening oneself to wisdom from God.

THE PRACTICE OF THE PRAYER FOR WISDOM

Acknowledge the limitations of your own understanding. Acknowledge also that God’s understanding and love for you is limitless.

Ask God for wisdom. This can be done on a daily basis or about particular circumstances and decisions we face.
PRAYER OF EXAMEN

The Prayer of Examen is a spiritual exercise developed over 500 years ago by St. Ignatius of Loyola. At its heart, the Prayer invites us into an intentional review of the past day while inviting God to share in our highs and our lows. Thus it leads us into a deeper trust and intimacy with God, a deeper self-awareness, and the healing that comes from the melding of the two.

The Prayer of Examen is an exercise of intentional remembering. It is structured to invite us to review and consider the events and emotions of the day in the light of the Presence of God. The strength of the Prayer is its simplicity and flexibility to connect with God about the practical realities of life.

THE PRACTICE OF THE PRAYER OF EXAMEN

Get comfortable. A comfortable and relatively quiet place will aid reflection and shut out distractions. Often journaling can aid focus during the practice and provide opportunity for review.

Prepare by quieting yourself before the Lord, to the best of your ability. It can be helpful to close your eyes and imagine yourself in the loving presence of God.

Thank. Recognize the reasons for gratitude throughout the day. Spend time reflecting upon these graces and being thankful in prayer.

Petition. Ask God for the grace to see whatever God wants you to engage in your day and life.

Review. The Examen gets its name from this step. It is a time to review what God shows you. There are two primary ways to practice this step. First, start at the beginning of your day and reflect upon the times you felt God’s presence or you felt absent from God. Second, examine your day by asking the following questions: When did you feel most alive, loved, or appreciated? When did you feel most anxious, detached, or unloving? When did God seem absent? When did God seem most present?

Resolve. The final step of the Examen is to bring resolution to what has been made clear. This may be taking action steps of confession, forgiveness, or amends. It may be journaling about a new self-awareness and asking Jesus to further reveal to you his grace, truth, and healing.
IMAGINATIVE PRAYER IN DECISION MAKING

Nearly every discernment practice aids in decision-making processes. But there are practical ways to create space for spiritual discernment in decisions that need to be made. St. Ignatius was a proponent of using prayerful imagination as a creative part of the decision-making process. The following practice is drawn from Larry Warner’s Discernment, God’s Will, and Living Jesus as he draws it from the larger writings of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

THE PRACTICE OF IMAGINATIVE PRAYER IN DECISION MAKING

Prepare by quieting yourself before the Lord, to the best of your ability. It can be helpful to close your eyes and imagine yourself in the loving presence of God.

Imagine. Prayerfully imagine yourself having already made a decision to your present dilemma. Spend some time resting in that decision. Does it inspire a sense of peace? What fears, resistances, and anxieties spring up as a result? Take note of your emotional, intellectual, and spiritual responses. If you have the luxury, spend more time in the decision, even a number of days. Then, prayerfully imagine yourself making a different decision to your present dilemma. Again, take stock of your feelings, thoughts, and spiritual responses.

Discern your responses. Ask God to also help you understand the ways that his peace and consolation were revealed. Ask God to help you understand the places where those responses may be helping to prepare you for potential difficulties in the decision.
SECTION THREE

The practices in this section are designed to create space for group discernment. They are designed to help you hear God speak and to recognize God’s presence within a group of people discerning together.

TEST FOR INDIFFERENCE

The prayer for indifference is a wholly personal practice. But in the context of group discernment, indifference or lack of indifference affects the ability of the group to discern. Ruth Haley Barton, in her book *Pursuing God’s Will Together*, notes that Quakers actually test the group to determine whether or not there is indifference. The person leading the process of group discernment simply asks, “How many are indifferent?” Barton writes, “Some might be able to report that, by God’s grace, they have come to a point of indifference. Others might say that they are still attached to the outcome but that they are still praying about it, asking God to bring them to a place of indifference. Another might acknowledge a personal preference but report that he or she is able to hold it with open hands for the good of the group – or not, if that is the case.” (p. 191)

Indifference provides the space for people to discern if God is speaking, moving, or leading the group, even if the guidance is counter to their own personal tendencies. Lack of indifference allows personal tendencies to counter God’s guidance.

THE PRACTICE OF THE TEST FOR INDIFFERENCE

**Acknowledge** to the group or, if alone, to yourself, that we are broken people partnering with the sovereign God. We acknowledge that we do not enter discernment unbiased. Profess the desire to entrust the things our biases are protecting into the hands of Jesus.

**Test** the level of indifference by bluntly asking the group or yourself, “Are you indifferent?”

**Recognize** that indifference and discernment are journeys of faith and relationship. Gracefully receive the answers and give space for people to seek God’s heart with a personal prayer of indifference. It is important to realize that a person’s lack of indifference does not mean their preferred answer is wrong. But, reaching that outcome from a place of indifference ensures that the process will not be manipulated by partiality.
COVENANT MAKING

Personal discernment springs from a vulnerable and intimate relationship with God. It is within the context of inviting God into our brokenness and trusting that, through his guidance, we will develop the gift of discernment. Within a group setting, vulnerability is not only an issue between the individual and God but also between members of the group. In order for a group to discern together, there needs to be a level of trust and safety that allows mistakes, disagreement, and changes of opinion. A covenant sets boundaries and expresses expectations for the creation of a discerning community.

The steps to the practice of covenant making are taken from Elizabeth Liebert’s The Way of Discernment.

THE PRACTICE OF COVENANT MAKING

Commit to the entire process which allows sufficient time for trust to grow within the group as a whole.

Contribute actively from your own prayer and reflection, but maintain the boundaries and level of vulnerability that, for you, are appropriate and safe.

Limit your sharing to allow time for everyone in the group to share.

Avoid offering advice. Giving advice intrudes negatively upon another’s discernment process.

Keep Confidence. Everything that is shared in the group is strictly confidential.
CONTEMPLATIVE LISTENING

Discernment in the group setting calls for an awareness that the Holy Spirit resides in each person in the group. Therefore, it is necessary to listen to each person with respect and with the humble expectation that the group may be blessed through any member of the group. This calls for contemplative listening that allows a safe space for each individual’s discernment processes.

Elizabeth Liebert describes the practice of contemplative listening in her book *The Way of Discernment*. She writes, “Contemplative listening, then, means bringing a full-bodied, loving presence to the person before you, as well as to what is said and what as yet remains unsaid. Contemplative listening seeks to honor the presence of the Holy Spirit in the speaker and between the listener and speaker. Such listening rests in warm, loving, engaged, and prayerful silence, which often needs few or no words. Contemplative listening is more than simply not speaking. It involves putting oneself aside to attend fully to the other. When your own current or remembered experience begins to play in your mind, set it aside for the moment. I call this self-forgetfulness ‘bracketing’ to convey the notion that one does not ultimately lose the self. Rather, one chooses, for this moment, to leave one’s own concerns aside in order to be fully present to another.”

THE PRACTICE OF CONTEMPLATIVE LISTENING

**Acknowledge** in your heart that each person in the group is a child of God and indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

**Confess** any predispositions and judgments you might have towards others in the group.

**Trust** God to moderate the discussion and to reveal God’s heart in due time.

**Communicate** openly in ways that are meant to honor each person and not sway or belittle anyone’s contributions. Allow the Holy Spirit to lead the room.

**Listen** for God’s voice in your own contemplations and in the contributions of others in the group.
CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Too often, an unspoken goal of the group is to avoid conflict. This can leave a group open to manipulation. When conflict does happen, it renders a group’s discernment rudderless as emotions, defensiveness, and fear take control.

Ruth Haley Barton, in her book Pursuing God’s Will Together, identifies several practices that aid in the challenges of conflict in groups. The following comes from pages 146ff in Barton’s book.

THE PRACTICE OF CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Affirm Jesus’ promise to be with us in the midst of conflict and find ways to be open to his presence in it.

Affirm that conflict can be the catalyst for needed growth and transformation of everyone involved.

Commit to direct face-to-face communication rather than resorting to triangulation and speaking behind each other’s backs.

Commit to discerning and doing God’s will in the midst of conflict, knowing that God’s will firmly holds onto the importance of how we treat and view each other in disagreement.

Develop skills and practices related to conflict transformation and articulate these clearly to the group.
APPENDIX F

Morning Meditations Scriptures and Questions

Through the duration of the Discernment Class, the participants received a daily weekday email to encourage them in the practice of *lectio divina*. The structure of the email did not change. Each day the email began with a brief instructions about the time needed for the practice. Alongside the right of the email were a list of instructions on how to listen to God in Scripture. The only aspect of the email that changed was the Scripture content and, at times, the questions for reflection. Below is a copy of the first “Morning Meditation” email to give the reader a sense of the layout. Following is a list of the scriptures and questions used in following emails.

(Give yourself 5-15 minutes for this morning meditation. In fact, it may be helpful to set an alarm for the amount of time you have to give so you can honor your schedule. This will also free you from any guilt you may feel about closing your time of listening.)

26 Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." *27* So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. **28** Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Genesis 1:26-28)

- Receive this text as if God is speaking about you.
- How does that make you feel?
- What does this tell you about how God views you?

**Instructions:**

1. Spend a moment quieting yourself. Sometimes it helps to close your eyes. Become aware that God looks upon you lovingly. Ask God to help you to see what he wants you to see as you engage with him in the Scripture text.

2. Slowly read the Scripture. Allow your imagination to set the scene and do not be alarmed to find yourself in it either as a passive bystander or as one of the characters.

3. Reflect on what you have read and experienced by looking at the reflection questions (if provided). Note where the text rang true or spoke into your thoughts, emotions, circumstances, or life.

4. Here is a good place to end if your time is short.

5. Time permitting, read the text again. Make note of any part of the text that struck you in particular. It may be a word, a phrase, a memory or image it inspired. Sit with this for a moment, turning it over in your mind prayerfully.

6. Journal or write prayers to God in response to what you have experienced.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Texts</th>
<th>Questions</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| January 15, 2018| Genesis 1:26-28 | • Receive this text as if God is speaking about you.  
• How does that make you feel?  
• What does this tell you about how God views you? |
| January 16, 2018| Genesis 2:7-9  | • Receive this text as if God is speaking about you.  
• How does that make you feel?  
• What does this tell you about how God views you?  
• How does this connect with how you typically understand yourself, your provision, or your source of life? |
| January 17, 2018| Ephesians 1:3-4 | • Receive this text as if God is speaking to you. Replace the word us with your own name and read the text again.  
• How does that make you feel?  
• What does this tell you about how God views you?  
• Allow this truth to challenge any guilt or shame you might have allowed to define your relationship with God. |
| January 18, 2018| Luke 12:6-7    | • Don't get caught up in the cost or selling of sparrows. Instead, receive this text as if God is speaking to you.  
• What does this tell you about God's awareness and presence in your circumstances?  
• How does this make you feel?  
• Ask God to open your heart to His closeness to you in all the details of your life, your work, your relationships, your body, and, yes, even the number of hairs upon your head. |
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Reading Material</th>
<th>Questions/Activities</th>
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| January 19, 2018 | Exercise adapted from Henry Blackaby and Claude King’s *Experiencing God Workbook* leading to the development of a personal spiritual timeline. | - What do you notice about your awareness of God's presence or lack of presence in your timeline?  
- Ask God to show you where he was at work in your life where you were aware of it and where you were not. |
| January 22, 2018 | Ephesians 2:1-3                                                                 | - It can be difficult to explore the brokenness of the world apart from Jesus. It can also be difficult to recognize our own place in it.  
- Are you aware of the places this text described you? Where do you see them in life?  
- Are you aware of the places this text still describes your struggle? Where do you see them in you?  
- Do you know your aliveness in God? Invite God into the brokenness that you see and ask him to reveal the ways he has made and is making you alive! |
| January 23, 2018 | Ephesians 2:4-7                                                                  | - Use your imagination to visualize God coming to you while you were dead in your trespasses.  
- Spend some time resting in the phrase "rich in mercy."  
- How does this text make you feel?  
- Ask God to reveal his great love for you today. |
| January 24, 2018 | Ephesians 2:8-10                                                                 | - Use your imagination to visualize God working on your behalf to offer you grace.  
- Do you understand the ways grace is disconnected from the things that you do?  
- Spend some time reflecting upon the grace that is not the result of works. |
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tr>
<td>January 25, 2018</td>
<td>Luke 5:1-11</td>
<td>What would good works look like in your life if they sprang from a full acceptance of the grace of God? Imagine you are a fisherman working with Peter in the boat that day. What do you see? What do you smell? What does the scene that unfolds before you cause to bubble up in you? Are there parts of your own guilt and shame that still cause you to push Jesus away from you? How can you open yourself to his work and word in your life today?</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 26, 2018</td>
<td>Psalm 51:1-12</td>
<td>Listen to this psalm of repentance from King David. Repentance is an important part of hearing God speak. It is a means of listening by clearing the other noise that builds up inside of us. Spend some time in repentance this morning if the Holy Spirit pricks your conscience. It is often helpful to pray this psalm as if it is your own. In this way, Scripture can give us words and direction where our words fail us.</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 29, 2018</td>
<td>Psalm 139:1-12</td>
<td>The closeness of God can be the greatest gift or the greatest terror. The psalmist seems to realize this as he recounts his attempts to flee. Do you recognize the ways you are &quot;prone to wander&quot;? How does this psalm make you feel toward God?</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 30, 2018</td>
<td>Luke 15:11-13</td>
<td>The beginning of this well-known parable highlights the brokenness of within each one of us. Where do you see yourself in this parable?</td>
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<td>Date</td>
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<td>Questions</td>
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| January 31, 2018 | Luke 15:14-19     | - Do you identify with the son who has not recognized the Father's love and instead squandered his inheritance?  
- Do you watch this interaction from a distance?  
- How does this text make you feel?  
- Does the Holy Spirit give rise to anything within you?  |
| February 1, 2018  | Luke 15:20-24     | - From the place of brokenness, how does the son view his Father?  
- What does he expect his Father's reaction to his return to be?  
- What do we expect God's attitude to be toward us when we look to Him?  |
| February 2, 2018  | Mark 2:15-17      | - How did the son expect to be treated by his Father?  
- How did his Father treat him?  
- What do we expect God's attitude to be toward us when we look to Him?  
- Can you accept the grace, love, and forgiveness that God has for you?  |
| February 5, 2018  | Romans 12:1-2     | - Imagine that you are one of the disciples in this narrative. How do Jesus' actions make you feel?  
- Now, imagine that you are one of the tax-collectors. How do Jesus' actions make you feel?  
- How do you hear Jesus whispering to your heart in this text?  |
|                |                    | - Imagine Paul speaking these verses to you.  
- How would you present your body as a living sacrifice?  
- In what ways can you put yourself in a position to be transformed by the renewing of your mind?  |
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Scripture</th>
<th>Questions</th>
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<tr>
<td>February 6, 2018</td>
<td>Romans 10:9-11</td>
<td>- What do you think is necessary for a relationship with the living God?</td>
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<td>- Do these verses seem too high or too low a cost?</td>
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<td>February 7, 2018</td>
<td>John 4:17-19</td>
<td>- What strikes you in this verse?</td>
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<td>- Do you consider yourself a person who loves more or fears more?</td>
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<td>- Where does your love (or fear) come from?</td>
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<td>- How does God look upon you in light of this verse?</td>
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<td>February 8, 2018</td>
<td>1 John 1:5-9</td>
<td>- What sticks out to you in this passage?</td>
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<td>- Do your relationships and how you feel about others testify to your</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>partnership with God or distance from God's love?</td>
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<td>- Do not be afraid of confession or the need for it. It is not the need</td>
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<td>that is important but rather the decision to turn to Christ even in our</td>
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<td>need.</td>
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<td>- Bring whatever the Holy Spirit is bringing up in you at this moment</td>
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<td>before the Lord. Speak confession with joy and know that in speaking you</td>
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<td>are forgiven!</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 9, 2018</td>
<td>2 Corinthians</td>
<td>- What sticks out to you in this passage?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3:17-18</td>
<td>- Do you move in the freedom of the Holy Spirit?</td>
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<td>- Where do you not feel free? Invite Jesus into your lack of freedom.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Notice that the key to Christlikeness is not in what you do but in seeing</td>
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<td>the glory of the Lord. It is relational. Ask Jesus to reveal God to you</td>
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<td>today!</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 12, 2018</td>
<td>Jeremiah 17:7-8</td>
<td>- What strikes you in this passage?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
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| February 13, 2018 | Exodus 3:1-5 | • Where do you draw your strength in life?  
• How have you gotten through times of dryness?  
• How do you send our spiritual roots into the stream? Instead of spinning on that question, ask God to help you spend time now rooting in Him. |
| February 14, 2018 | Psalm 23:1-4 | • Imagine you are Moses in this text. How would you respond to the burning bush? What might be the equivalent of a burning bush in your job?  
• Notice that hearing from God involved Moses turning aside. How might you turn aside to make space to hear from God today? |
| February 15, 2018 | Luke 19:1-10 | • Where do you see yourself in this narrative?  
• Is there a large change in Zacchaeus' decision to climb a tree to look and to jump down and invite Jesus to dinner?  
• Where do you think you are on the spectrum of looking to Jesus? Are you in a tree looking from afar? Or have you accepted his gracious presence speaking into your life and business and relationships? |
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<th>Discussion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February 19, 2018</td>
<td>James 1:5</td>
<td></td>
<td>• What does wisdom mean to you?</td>
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<td>• What does wisdom that comes from God look like?</td>
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<td>• Spend some time asking God for wisdom. Invite God's wisdom into the various circumstances and decisions in your life.</td>
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<td>February 20, 2018</td>
<td>Jeremiah 29:11-14</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Imagine God speaking the words of this passage to you.</td>
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<td>• Turn over in your mind the ways this passage speaks of God's intimacy and closeness but also the ways he is separate from you... worthy of being heard, understood, and sought.</td>
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<td>• Is there a particular circumstance or relationship in your life that is in need of God's touch in your life? Spend some time seeking him with all your heart.</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 21, 2018</td>
<td>1 Kings 19:9-13</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Imagine yourself in this text. Feel Elijah's disappointment, depression, and loneliness. Experience the Presence of the Lord.</td>
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<td>• Other translations use the words &quot;a still small voice&quot; in reference to how God spoke to Elijah in this text. Have you experienced the still small voice of God? If not, how do you imagine it to &quot;sound&quot;?</td>
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<td>• How do you expect God to show up and speak into your life?</td>
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<td>February 22, 2018</td>
<td>Isaiah 30:19-21</td>
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<td>• What strikes you about this text?</td>
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<td>• What does it say about the voice of God in your life?</td>
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<td>February 23, 2018</td>
<td>St. Ignatius meditation from Larry Warner’s book.</td>
<td>• How might you put yourself in a position to hear God speak?</td>
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<td>February 26, 2018</td>
<td>Matthew 8:23-27</td>
<td>• Imagine yourself in this passage. Imagine the sights and the sounds... the feelings of the disciples.</td>
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<td>• What are your feelings about Jesus at the beginning of the passage? After he awakens?</td>
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<td>• How do you respond when Jesus seems silent?</td>
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<td>February 27, 2018</td>
<td>2 Samuel 5:17-21</td>
<td>• Imagine yourself in this Scripture passage. What is your initial reaction to finding that people have risen against you? How would you expect God to respond to a request for His lead?</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• What are the places you could ask God's opinion on the circumstances in front of you?</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• How do you expect God to answer?</td>
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<td>February 28, 2018</td>
<td>2 Samuel 5:22-27</td>
<td>• Notice that God's response this morning was different from his response to the same question at a different time. What does this tell us about our relationship with God?</td>
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<td>March 1, 2018</td>
<td>Psalm 13</td>
<td>• How do the words of this prayer make you feel?</td>
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<td>• How do you process the times when God seems silent?</td>
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<td>• How does this psalm prepare us for relationship with the Living God?</td>
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| March 5, 2018 | Isaiah 55:1-5 | • Imagine God speaking the words of this passage directly to you. Replace the word "you" with your name. How does this passage make you feel?  
• How does it convict you?  
• How does it inspire you?  
• What might you do in response to this passage? |
| March 6, 2018 | Isaiah 55:6-9 | • What is your first reaction to this passage?  
• As you re-read it, what part of the passage sticks out to you? Why? |
| March 7, 2018 | John 14:15-17 | • What is your reaction to Jesus' words here?  
• What role does the Holy Spirit play in discerning God in your life?  
• How does the Spirit's contrast with the world and home in you complicate the task of discernment in your life? How might it make discernment that much more important? |
| March 8, 2018 | Isaiah 55:10-11 | • What does this passage reveal about the power of God's words?  
• How has God's word proven faithful to you in the past?  
• How does the evocative imagery about watering and sprouting and bringing forth seed inform the ways that God's word works in us?  
• How might you hold firm in faith? |
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<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>March 9, 2018</td>
<td>John 10:22-30</td>
<td>- Imagine yourself in the story of this passage. As you overhear the</td>
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<td>conversation, what are your feelings about those who question Jesus?</td>
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<td>What are your feelings about Jesus' answer?</td>
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<td>- Is it easy for you to consider yourself among Jesus' sheep?</td>
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<td>- How is the Holy Spirit leading you to respond to this passage?</td>
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<td>March 12, 2018</td>
<td>Psalm 131</td>
<td>- This Psalm is typically considered a psalm of ascent. It was a psalm</td>
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<td>that was used in the preparation for worship in the House of God.</td>
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<td>- How does this psalm help you to prepare yourself to be in the Presence</td>
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<td>of the Lord?</td>
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<td>- Why is humility so important to discernment?</td>
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<td>- This Psalm provides space to practice humility or humbling ourselves</td>
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<td>before God. Imagine yourself quieting yourself before God as you make</td>
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<td>this psalm your prayer.</td>
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<td>March 13, 2018</td>
<td>1 Corinthians 12:14-26</td>
<td>- Have you ever considered the role other people play in your relationship</td>
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<td>with God?</td>
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<td>- What are some of the exciting things connected to our need for other</td>
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<td>people to fully be the Body of Christ?</td>
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<td>- What are some of the difficulties that come with the need for other</td>
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<td>people to fully be the Body of Christ?</td>
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<td>- Is the Holy Spirit raising any memory or thought to mind in regard to</td>
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<td>this passage? If so, go before the Lord to prayer as you are lead.</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 14, 2018</td>
<td>1 Corinthians 12:27-31</td>
<td>- Don't get caught up in the beginning on what you &quot;are&quot; in the body of</td>
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<td>Christ. Too often, that taps into our</td>
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competitiveness and shame. Instead, turn over the idea that you are not meant to be on your own. No one is supposed to be self-sufficient. Instead, we are supposed to be in a place where we need others and others need us. Contemplate this counter-cultural reality. Notice what bubbles up inside of you in response to it.

- It is only from a place of acceptance and embrace of our mutual connection that we are supposed to seek to know the place God has called us to. Only then will we seek the "greater gifts" not for ourselves but for each other and for God's glory.
- Spend some time asking God to bring you to the proper place of connectedness with other Christians.
- Then, begin to ask God to release you into giftedness that will be a blessing to others and to God.

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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<th>Notes</th>
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| March 15, 2018| 1 Corinthians 13 | - Allow the words of this powerful passage to wash over you as you read them.  
  - Take note of the words or phrases, images or memories that stick out to you during the reading. Assume that these are leadings of the Holy Spirit and turn those things over prayerfully in your mind as you seek to hear all that God is saying to you in this text. |
| March 16, 2018| Philippians 3:15-16 | - What strikes you about these words from Paul?  
  - How do you typically proceed when things are not clear or you find yourself thinking differently than someone else?  
  - How do these words guide us in regard to the ways God speaks to us together? |
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<th>Date</th>
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<th>Questions</th>
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| March 19, 2018 | Mark 10:13-16 | - What strikes you about this text?  
  - Imagine yourself in this scene. Who would you want to keep away from Jesus to keep them from bothering him?  
  - Would you expect someone to keep you away?  
  - How does this passage set the parameters for connection with Jesus?  
  - How does it teach us to treat other people in our attempts to know Jesus? |
| March 20, 2018 | Acts 6:1-7   | - For the next couple of days, we will be looking at conflict or disagreements in the early Church.  
  - What are the ways that the Church attempted to discern God's lead in the midst of this conflict?  
  - What can we learn about the presence of conflict and listening to God? |
| March 21, 2018 | Acts 15:1-19 | - For the next couple of days, we will be looking at conflict or disagreements in the early Church.  
  - What are the ways that the Church attempted to discern God's lead in the midst of this conflict?  
  - What can we learn about the presence of conflict and listening to God? |
| March 22, 2018 | Acts 21:10-14 | - For the next couple of days, we will be looking at conflict or disagreements in the early Church.  
  - What are the ways that the Church attempted to discern God's lead in the midst of this conflict?  
  - What can we learn about the presence of conflict and listening to God? |
| March 23, 2018 | John 17:20-24 | • What strikes you in this prayer that Jesus prayed for us?  
• How does this prayer equip us to better discern God's voice in the world? |
| March 26, 2018 | Luke 22:24-30 | • During Holy Week, we will look at the interactions of Jesus and his disciples leading up to his death. What does this story show us about our temptations even when we are close to Jesus?  
• How does Jesus speak into the imperfect desires of James and John?  
• How does Jesus speak into your own brokenness?  
• Rejoice in Jesus' grace and gentleness with you. Discerning the voice of God is not an exercise in perfection but in being open to the grace of God where you are. |
| March 27, 2018 | Luke 22:31-34 | • During Holy Week, we will look at the interactions of Jesus and his disciples leading up to his death.  
• What does this story show us about our temptations even when we are close to Jesus?  
• Allow yourself to take the place of Peter in this text. In what ways are you like Peter? In what ways are you not?  
• How does Jesus speak to you? |
| March 28, 2018 | Luke 22:39-46 | • During Holy Week, we will look at the interactions of Jesus and his disciples leading up to his death.  
• What does this story show us about our temptations even when we are close to Jesus?  
• Allow yourself to take the place of the disciples in this text. In what ways are you like the disciples? In what ways are you not? |
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| March 29, 2018 | Luke 23:32-43 | - During Holy Week, we will look at the interactions of Jesus and his disciples leading up to his death.  
- What does this story show us about our temptations even when we are close to Jesus?  
- Allow yourself to take the place of one of the criminals in this text. In what ways are you like the criminal? In what ways are you not?  
- How does Jesus speak to you? |
| March 30, 2018 | Luke 23:44-49 | - During Holy Week, we will look at the interactions of Jesus and his disciples leading up to his death.  
- What does this story show us about our temptations even when we are close to Jesus?  
- Allow yourself to take the place of one of the witnesses of Christ's crucifixion. In what ways are you like the different witnesses in the story? In what ways are you not?  
- How does Jesus speak to you? |


Rovira Bellos, Josep M. “Who is Capable of Discerning?” In Samanes and Duquoc, *Discernment of the Spirit and of Spirits*, 84-94.


