Crossroads Retreat: A Spiritual Discernment Journey for Those Facing Major Life Decision

Andrew Ranucci
andrew.ranucci@gmail.com

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This ministry focus paper entitled

CROSSROADS RETREAT: A SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT JOURNEY
FOR THOSE FACING MAJOR LIFE DECISION

Written by

ANDREW RANUCCI

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

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary
upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:

Stephen Hinks

Kurt Fredrickson

Date Received: January 8, 2019
CROSSROADS RETREAT: A SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT JOURNEY
FOR THOSE FACING MAJOR LIFE DECISION

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
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 RANUCCI
DECEMBER 2018
ABSTRACT

Crossroads Retreat: A Spiritual Discernment Journey for those Facing Major Life Decision
Andrew Ranucci
Doctor of Ministry
School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary
2019

The topic of spiritual discernment is certainly one of the most challenging aspects of the pastoral role. Congregational members are at times presented with major decisions, placing them at the crossroads of life. Assisting such parishioners, to discern the will of God, is a fundamentally important element of the pastoral role.

This project proposes a Spiritual Discernment Retreat, which seeks to synthesize wisdom on discernment from the early desert dwellers, St. Ignatius Loyola and Dallas Willard. These writings are highly regarded for their insight into discernment. Focusing on their combined wisdom will provide a trustworthy foundation spanning two millennia, thus offering helpful principles for a discernment journey.

The Spiritual Discernment Retreat will be offered to people within Coast Community Church who are facing important, life-shaping decisions. The retreat will be preceded by two weeks of preparation and groundwork and followed up by a one-week period of consolidation and confirmation. Together, these three weeks will seek to provide an opportunity for the participant to consider their decision within the context of God’s sovereign will and their unique calling.

Part One investigates the ministry context of the church and the community, seeking to explore factors contributing to the issues of isolation, financial stress, tiredness and frustration, for those living on the Central Coast. These challenges have detrimental effects on the well being of local congregants and can lead to veritable struggles when seeking to discern the will of God. The church has responded to the spiritual needs of its members by developing a series of spiritual retreats, where individuals are given the opportunity, teaching and time to invest in their relationship with God. In addition to these retreats, the Spiritual Discernment Retreat will be offered to those in the church struggling to gain clarity and conviction from God, when seeking his will. The context of a retreat will provide the much needed and valued time and space to seek God’s leading.

Part Two explores wisdom from three traditions on discernment: the desert dwellers, Ignatius and Willard. Though these authors are separated by many centuries, this paper seeks to draw on their convictions on discernment. Part Two will also use Jeremiah 6:16 as a framework for the development of a discernment journey and to present a solid biblical and theological structure for individuals when seeking the will of God.

Part Three describes the content and implementation of the Spiritual Discernment Retreat, including the important role of the two weeks preceding the retreat and one week following. All together the discernment process extends to a three-week journey, where participants are led through proven Biblical principles drawn from three traditions known
for their wisdom and value on discernment. Upon completion, the hope is for church members to be able to confidently make their decision with a Godly conviction and peace.

Content Reader: Stephen Hinks, DMin

Word Count: 487
DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my wife,
Kerrell Ranucci,
my constant encourager, greatest supporter and precious soul mate.

“A wife of noble character who can find?
She is worth far more than rubies.” Prov 31:10

“Many women do noble things,
but you surpass them all.” Prov 31:29

You are God’s greatest gift to me.

I am eternally grateful.
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INTRODUCTION

The discernment of God’s will, when facing major life decisions, is amongst the most common pastoral concerns for those in a church community. A high school graduate faces a decision related to the focus of her future studies at University. A new graduate faces the challenging choice of deciding on his workplace. A young couple seeks discernment regarding the future of their relationship. A young family, are at a crossroads through a workplace promotion opportunity, requiring relocation to another state. Another couple discerns whether they ought to adopt an orphan from Korea. A married couple faces a decision to separate and divorce after marital counselling fails to resolve their differences. A single lady is unsure whether to seek an appropriate aged care facility for her ageing father or to take care of him at home. Those within church communities are often considering important decisions with considerable consequences. A process to assist church members to discern the will of God may certainly be of great value.

Decisions determine one’s future. One’s decisions hold the power to influence and direct the course of one’s life, and some decisions can be difficult to reverse. It is certainly comforting to know God is able to redeem circumstances, where unwise decisions have been made. Nevertheless, it is difficult to avoid living with the consequences of unwise decisions. Understanding how decisions fit into the broader will of God and his particular calling on his followers’ lives, can help them gain the confidence they need to make an important decision.

As a pastor I understand both the importance and the responsibility of supporting Christians in our congregation with regards to their decision-making. I am at times left
perplexed with the decisions made by some and the lack of process taken for spiritual
discernment. My desire is to see members of our church approach major life decisions
through a prayerful process, where considerable thought is given to the issues,
consequences and most importantly, the appreciation of God’s calling and will for their
lives. My interest is to see every Christian live their unique calling, with all of the
decisions that entails, within the framework of seeking first the Kingdom of God.

The Spiritual Discernment Retreat outlined in this project, will be limited to
twelve participants and is designed for any member of Coast Community Church,
standing at the crossroads of life, facing a major life decision. Jeremiah, the Old
Testament prophet writes: “This is what the Lord says: ‘Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest
for your souls’” (Jer 6:16).1 Rest, peace and confidence can be found by taking the time
to embrace a reflective process with God and to consider the good way of his will for
one’s life. The Spiritual Discernment Retreat will be preceded by a preparation evening,
two weeks prior, to establish listening and discernment practices in the participant’s life.
These two weeks provide a groundwork for the discernment retreat.

The three-day discernment retreat itself, will include teaching from a variety of
timeless principles regarding discernment, through the wisdom of the desert dwellers,
Ignatius Loyola and Dallas Willard. Time will be given for extensive reflection, listening,
praying and journaling. The retreat will be followed by a week of prayer exercises, to
confirm the convictions of God’s leading. The hope is for participants to find the three-

1 All Scripture quoted is from the New International Version, unless otherwise noted.
week process invaluable for discerning the will of God, for the unique decisions they are considering.

The preparation evening at the start of the discernment process helps clarify the actual decision being discerned. Clarity regarding the decision will assist the discernment process greatly. The preparation evening will also assist the participant to consider their orientation of life. Spiritual discernment will not be possible without a clear and definite orientation toward God and his Kingdom. Teachings on the *examen* and *lectio divina* will also be offered to assist with the daily practices required for the entire three-week discernment journey. The importance of understanding how individuals experience both consolation and desolation during the discernment process will also be taught.

The three-day retreat includes a series of carefully crafted reflection questions drawn mostly from the wisdom found in the writings of the desert dwellers, Ignatius and Willard. These questions are designed to assist the retreatant to consider more deeply their decision and be invited into prayer and reflection, leading to an increasing sense of consolation or desolation. Journaling one’s thoughts, impressions, emotions and insights will be an important element to the discernment journey. Opportunity for extended solitude, silence and teaching on the role of these important disciplines will be given during the retreat, as will more general teaching on spiritual discernment. One spiritual direction session also will be offered to each participant during the retreat.

If a participant feels led to a decision by the end of the retreat, they will be encouraged to sit with this for the week following, prior to communicating it widely. This final confirmation week will continue to include the daily practices of *lectio divina* and
examen, to further assist with the experience of consolation or desolation for the decision being made.

The celebration evening, which concludes this three-week process, will gather participants to share their discernment journey together. Communicating one’s decision confidentially to a group of fellow disciples, will help the participants to consolidate and clarify their understanding of God’s leading. For those still unable to discern the will of God, this acts as an important recognition that their discernment journey continues.

The target audience for this project will be members of Coast Community Church on the Central Coast of New South Wales, Australia. The Central Coast is an area, consisting of approximately 300,000 people. The area is a mix of working class and professional people, many of whom, commute to the city of Sydney for their occupation. Coast Community Church consists of 717 active individuals: 27 percent children, 14 percent teenagers and young adults and 59 percent adults, including the elderly. The most predominant demographic is young families with children. Many of these families are in the busiest time of their lives and often face important decisions, which have the potential to impact the future direction of their families.
PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT
CHAPTER ONE
COMMUNITY CONTEXT OF THE CENTRAL COAST

This chapter will seek to describe the community context within which Coast Community Church is placed. The location is unique, with its proximity to Sydney, whilst sitting amid magnificent beaches, waterways and national parks. The beauty of the area belies the troubles posed in being a satellite city of the largest city in Australia. With Sydney house prices sky-rocketing over recent years, the Central Coast has become an affordable and desirable option, particularly for families. This growth wave over the past two decades has come at the expense of many workers now resigned to commuting three-to-four hours a day. This has added increased pressure to family relationships and in particular to marriages. The sense of isolation has been amplified through the natural disconnection, which occurs when migrating to a new location. This feeling is exacerbated with the limited time available to establish new friendships and support networks. Seeking to discern the will of God at the crossroads of major life decisions, whilst facing social isolation, tiredness and time poverty is a great challenge addressed through this project.
A Satellite City of Sydney

Families often end up residing on the fringes of major cities due to the financial pressures of raising a family. Living on the fringe of a major city presents its own challenges. Those living on the Central Coast often find themselves torn between the pleasures of living in a beautiful area yet being unable to enjoy its offerings due to the need for extensive weekday commuting.

Families are Financially Pressured

The Central Coast has long offered an alternative to the expensive Sydney housing market, whilst offering a desirable lifestyle for raising a family near the natural beauty of beaches and national parks. Sadly, Sydney house prices are now amongst the most expensive in the world:

Sydney has held its status as the world’s most unaffordable housing market behind only Hong Kong, despite recent falls in prices. An annual study of the housing markets in more than 400 cities across the world classified Harbour City real estate as “severely unaffordable”, with home prices requiring a greater share of residents’ income than in London, Los Angeles, Tokyo or New York. A Sydney home priced at the city’s median of about $1 million is almost 13 times the typical household’s annual income, according to the annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey.1

With Sydney housing prices out of reach for many families, the Central Coast, lying approximately one hundred kilometres north of the Sydney CBD, presents a realistic alternative. Though the real estate is certainly more affordable, making the possibility of owning a house more realistic, the truth is the average household income

for the Central Coast is also considerably lower. The 2016 National Census recorded a difference of $1258.00 per week\(^2\) for the Central Coast in comparison with $1750.00 per week\(^3\) for the Greater Sydney area. There is also a lower proportion of higher income earners and a higher proportion of lower income earners, which makes the housing prices still out of reach for many.

Analysis of household income levels in the Central Coast Council area in 2016 compared to Greater Sydney shows that there was a smaller proportion of high income, households (those earning $2,500 per week or more) and a higher proportion of low income, households (those earning less than $650 per week). Overall, 16.6% of the households earned a high income and 20.6% were low income households, compared with 28.3% and 15.1% respectively for Greater Sydney.\(^4\)

Financial pressure is a common problem many Central Coast families face. Decisions to commute to Sydney often arise when seeking more lucrative employment opportunities. Sadly, the trade-off for higher paying city job is the longer working day due to the additional commuting hours.

**A Location Desired by Families**

Families make the move north from Sydney not only for the affordable housing prices, but the area also offers appealing amenities for raising a family. The natural beauty of the beaches and waterways, the numerous national parks and green space, the many schools, churches and sporting clubs make the ideal setting for raising children.

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\(^3\) Ibid.

The dream of owning a home, whilst enjoying relaxed weekends in a location with abundant natural beauty allures many.

A Popular Choice for Retirees

The more affordable housing prices and proximity to the services of Sydney also make the Central Coast an attractive proposition for retirees. Proportionally there is a larger representation of retirees on the Central Coast, in comparison with the greater Sydney area:

Analysis of the five-year age groups of the Central Coast Council area in 2016 compared to Greater Sydney shows that there was a similar proportion of people in the younger age groups (under 15) and a higher proportion of people in the older age groups (65+). Overall, 18.4% of the population was aged between 0 and 15, and 20.9% were aged 65 years and over, compared with 18.7% and 13.9% respectively for Greater Sydney.\(^5\)

Retirees have been well catered for with a proliferation of retirement villages and nursing homes developed in the area over recent decades. The Church finds itself acting as an important meeting place for retirees and somewhere the elderly can develop a supportive social network.

A City Plagued with the Tyranny of Commuting

One of the benefits of moving to the Central Coast, more affordable housing, also creates one of the curses of living on the Central Coast, as noted earlier, commuting to work. A high proportion of the working population unfortunately find themselves spending anywhere between two-to-five hours a day commuting to work. A recent survey

reveals, “From the 2016 Census, of the 139,504 working residents living on the Central Coast 35,287 or 25.3% of the Central Coast Council area’s working residents travel outside of the area to work.” The tyranny of commuting is caused by limited local employment opportunities and leads to increased pressure on relationships, especially within marriages, families and the raising of children.

Limited Local Career Opportunities

Though the Central Coast maintains employment and career opportunities, it is mostly limited to certain industries. The 2016 Census offered the following data:

An analysis of the jobs held by the local workers in Central Coast Council area in 2016 shows the three most popular industry sectors were: Health Care and Social Assistance (18,868 local workers 18%), Retail Trade (13,563 local workers 13%) and Accommodation and Food Services (9,910 local workers 9.5%). In combination these three industries employed 42,341 people in total or 40.5% of local workers.7 The Census noted that the next greatest employers were Education and Training (8878), Construction (8642) and Manufacturing (7218). When these three additional industries are added to Health Care, Social Assistance and Retail Trade, these six industries make up a total of 64.1 percent of all employment. Opportunities in alternative industries are certainly limited and for this reason many workers find themselves commuting to Sydney where the prospect for employment is much higher. The 2012 Central Coast Quality of


Life survey indicates, “69.9 per cent of residents who commuted more than 50kms did so because the type of work they were employed in was not available closer to home.”

Commuters Facing Increased Pressure on Time

Adding anywhere from ten-to-twenty hours of commuting per week provides many challenges to those living on the Central Coast. Pressure on the commodity of time is dramatically increased. In 2012, The Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics conducted a thorough study on the estimates of average commuting distances for Australian workers. The study found those living on the Central Coast on average commuted the furthest. They report:

Central Coast employed residents show the highest average commuting distance (27.6 km) despite it showing the highest self-containment rate among Sydney subregions (BITRE 2012). The distribution of commuting distance in this subregion shows a pattern of concentration at both ends of the spectrum. It comprises 21 per cent commuting less than 5 km (the shortest distance range), and 23 per cent commuting more than 50 km (the longest distance range). For example, some residents of Budgewoi-Buff Point within the Central Coast SA4 commuted over 100 km to Sydney Airport or Port Botany or Mascot-Eastlakes.

With the highest average commuting distances in the country, it is no wonder residents of the Central Coast find themselves facing increasing pressure managing time. Those

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travelling over 100km to work, find themselves adding at least twenty hours to their working week. The squeeze on time leads to a host of challenges, not the least maintaining a healthy balanced life.

A City Plagued with Time Poverty

Over 1,500 interviews were used in Anthea Bill and Shanthi Ramanathan’s 2012 report titled “Quality of Life for Central Coast Residents.” The analysis of this report found that a large proportion of Central Coast residents feel challenged when it comes to the management of time. In fact, “Over half (50.7%) of Central Coast respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they often feel rushed or pressured for time.”\(^{11}\) Time poverty has a detrimental effect on residents, not least to their physical health. The same report also found that “Only one in five of Central Coast residents surveyed undertook moderate physical activity daily. Two out of five residents undertook moderate physical activity on a weekly basis and one in four did not undertake any moderate physical activity.”\(^{12}\) Living a healthy life with a good balance between work, leisure and relationships is challenging when time is at a premium. The “Quality of Life for Central Coast Residents” report clearly drew a link between residents struggling with the feeling of being rushed and a lower sense of well-being:

There is reason to expect that persons with inadequate leisure time will have lower well-being. In 2012 Central Coast residents who strongly disagreed that they often feel rushed or pressured had significantly higher well-being scores than those who strongly agreed with this statement. Similarly, Central Coast residents who disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were mostly satisfied with the

\(^{11}\) Bill and Ramanathan, “Quality of Life of Central Coast Residents,” 64.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 24.
amount of free time they had scored lower mean wellbeing ratings than those who agreed or strongly agreed that they were mostly satisfied with the amount of free time available.\textsuperscript{13}

A City with Social Challenges

Those living on the Central Coast sadly face numerous social challenges typical to a satellite city of a major capital city. The lure of affordable housing and an improved lifestyle by the beach, leads many to migrate north from Sydney. John Wilkinson in a parliamentary report titled “The Central Coast Region: An Economic Profile,” writes:

Two major features of the Central Coast economy can be noted, both connected to the region's proximity to the Sydney metropolitan region. One is the migration over the last few decades of residential population to the Central Coast, transforming it from a holiday and retirement area to an urban fringe area of Sydney. The other is the daily migration of a large section of the working population out of the region.\textsuperscript{14}

The social challenges for those living on the urban fringe of a major city escalate in a variety of ways. New migrants to the Central Coast experience increased isolation from family and friends. Initiating new supportive relationships inevitably takes time. The Central Coast only offers one University, with limited course selection; young people therefore tend to leave the area, to pursue higher education goals in Sydney. Those who have completed their high school education and then seek employment are also attracted to the greater opportunities in Sydney. Sadly, marriages also face increased pressure with a prevalence of separation and divorce.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 65.

The Problem of Social Isolation

Though the benefits of migrating north from Sydney to the Central Coast tempt many to make the move, one of the challenges is the ensuing feeling of loneliness. Leaving one’s family and friends behind can lead to social isolation, which can be difficult to overcome. Isolation is especially true for commuters, with less time available to invest in new relationships. The Central Coast Quality of Life Report states that “60 per cent of residents in 2012 indicated that they rarely did things with their neighbours, 28 per cent said they rarely or never helped each other out and 46 per cent said they never or rarely popped over for a cuppa or a chat.”\textsuperscript{15} These indicators describe a disconnected community with a serious condition of social isolation. Though this is not solely unique to the Central Coast, it certainly adds to the social challenges of those living in the area.

A Place Young Adults Tend to Abandon

According to the 2016 Australian Census, those aged between 20 and 39 living on the Central Coast make up 21.8 percent of the population, which is a significant reduction from the state average of 27.4 percent.\textsuperscript{16} In comparison with the rest of the state, the Central Coast sees at least 25 percent of its young adults move to other locations in the pursuit of tertiary studies or employment opportunities. Such a reduction of young adults within the community, once again adds to the social complexities of the Central Coast.

\textsuperscript{15} Bill and Ramanathan, “Quality of Life of Central Coast Residents,” 125.

\textsuperscript{16} Australian Bureau of Statistics, “2016 Census QuickStats Central Coast NSW.”
Marriages Facing Increased Pressure

Families are the foundation upon which a community is built. When family relationships are under pressure, particularly marriages, anxiety and stress increase amongst family members. Wholesome relationships require an investment of time and attention; in a society where the commodity of time is at a premium, relationships suffer. The pressure, particularly on marriages, is evident through the 2016 Census data. The statistics reveal that in comparison with the state of New South Wales, the Central Coast has a higher rate of separation and divorce. The combined average of separation and divorce amongst those over fifteen years of age in the state of New South Wales is 11.5 percent. In comparison, the combined average of separation and divorce amongst those over fifteen years of age living in the Central Coast is 14.9 percent. The statistics show that separation and divorce for those living on the Central Coast is nearly 30 percent higher than the rest of the state.\textsuperscript{17} With marriages suffering, families are likewise suffering. Separation and divorce lead to increased economic pressures, mental health stresses, relational complications and more.

Whilst the Central Coast is a geographically beautiful location, its residents face their own particular set of social challenges. As a satellite city of Sydney, the Central Coast sees a growing population of families and retirees seeking a more affordable lifestyle. The move away from family and friends means the Central Coast can be a lonely place to live, until new social and friendship networks are developed. Sadly, the Central Coast economy is unable to offer the variety and level of employment

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
opportunities, which leaves many workers with no option but to commute to Sydney to pursue their career. The high proportion of commuters leads to increasing time pressures and the resulting complexity of social isolation, with limited time to invest in new relationships. Statistically, marriages also suffer with contributing factors including time poverty and separation from close friends and family. The idyllic lifestyle on offer in the Central Coast comes with its own unique set of challenges.

Though the Central Coast is an attractive proposition for families or retirees who are seeking for more affordable housing in a lifestyle location, the area also presents a number of challenges. This paper seeks to address just one of these challenges, as it relates to discerning the will of God, when facing important decisions. Issues such as social isolation, time poverty and increased marital pressures, all contribute toward the challenge of making wise and sound decisions. Social isolation, with the lack of local long-standing friendships and proximity to family, jeopardizes the capacity to include trusted others in the discernment process. Discerning the will of God is best achieved when one has the time and space to pray and seek the heart of God; a rhythm of regular personal reflection; opportunity to contemplate the important issues; companions to share the journey with. All these opportunities and more will be offered in the project outlined in this paper. The Spiritual Discernment Retreat is designed to provide an approach for discernment, when facing major life decisions, so some of the challenges of living on the Central Coast, can be overcome.
CHAPTER TWO
MINISTRY CONTEXT OF COAST COMMUNITY CHURCH

Coast Community Church: Healthy, Growing and Full of Love

This chapter will seek to describe the ministry context of Coast Community Church. The church attracts a wide range of demographics with people coming from an assortment of denominational backgrounds, looking for a contemporary church, with a range of age specific ministries. Coast Community Church is guided by a clear vision and set of values, which permeate the culture and direction of the church. A unique aspect of the church’s ministry is its model and strategy for discipleship, which includes a comprehensive spiritual retreats ministry. The Spiritual Discernment Retreat outlined in this paper will be added to the existing array of retreats offered by the church.

Guided by a Clear Vision

Coast Community Church takes its vision statement from the final words of Ephesians 4:16 in the New Living Translation of the Scriptures: “He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.” The church
communicates its vision this way: Coast Community Church – “Healthy, growing and full of love.” Paul wrote these words as a vision for the Ephesian church, a picture describing the attributes of a vibrant local community of believers. Coast Community Church promotes this vision as a relevant, clear and compelling description of the kind of church it desires to be.

Firstly, Coast Community Church desires to be a healthy church in every dimension of life—spiritually, relationally and emotionally. The Scriptures provide various indicators for health including the fruits of the spirit mentioned by the Apostle Paul in Galatians 5. Secondly, Coast Community Church desires to see individuals growing toward increasing health and maturity in their relationship with God, their relationship with others and their relationship with themselves. Growth through the transformation of one’s character, leads to a growing resemblance of the life of Jesus.

Thirdly, Coast Community Church desires to be a community full of love. When Jesus was quizzed regarding the greatest commandment, he responded unequivocally: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Mt 22:36-40). For Jesus, love is clearly the single most important attribute for those seeking to follow him. Coast Community Church likewise desires to see love as the most important value amongst those who seek to pursue a genuine relationship with Jesus. The Church
leaders understand that love is unquestionably the greatest indicator of health for those who belong to the church.

Shaped by an Expressed Set of Values

The values of Coast Community Church seek to describe and shape the culture of the church and those who are a part of it. There are five values clearly expressed. The hope is to see these values flourish within the culture of the church.

The first value of grace seeks to describe a community of people who embrace God’s unconditional love and then extend it to others. Grace is understood through Paul’s teaching in the New Testament, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph 2:8-9). Grace is understood as unmerited favour, the lavish gift of God upon humankind. Grace is to be dispensed as it is received, freely, generously, liberally.

The second value of growth acknowledges that to grow in Christ-likeness requires more than will power, it requires the partnership of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul taught: “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow” (1 Cor 3:6-7). Coast Community Church desires to foster a culture where each person “will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ” (Eph 4:15). This process of transformation will require a partnership with the indwelling Spirit of God, for “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:6).
The third value of gratitude seeks to describe a community of believers who are increasingly aware of God’s blessings around them. The Apostle Paul encourages the Church to: “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful” (Col 4:2). Watchfulness and awareness of the innumerable graces and blessings of God leads one to live with a greater state of gratitude. The Psalmist reminds his readers of the importance of expressing gratitude when he writes: “I will give thanks to you, Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds” (Ps 9:1). Thankfulness as an expression of gratitude is a deeply valued characteristic for those at Coast Community Church.

The fourth value of generosity describes a culture where it is more blessed to give than to receive. The early church was known for its spirit of generosity as recorded in the New Testament book of Acts:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need (Acts 4:32-35).

The deeds of generosity by those in the early church were truly inspiring. Similarly, today, generosity is one of the ways disciples can display God’s qualities to the world. God himself generously gave the life of his Son to provide the way for salvation: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). Likewise, a community of faith, seeking to be shaped by the image of God, will develop a culture of increasing generosity.
The final value of genuineness seeks to describe a culture of integrity and authenticity amongst the members of the church. One of the greatest complaints Jesus made about the religious leaders of his day was their hypocrisy and lack of integrity. Matthew records, “Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ‘The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses seat. So, you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach’” (Mt 23:1-3).

Later in the same chapter, Jesus continues to admonish the religious leaders: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but, on the inside, you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness” (Mt 23:27-28). The value of genuineness seeks to address the temptation toward hypocrisy and duplicity within the church, by encouraging disciples to live a transparent life of integrity and authenticity.

Values are designed to shape and form culture. The leaders of Coast Community Church are dedicated to communicating these values; by the way they model them in their everyday lives. The personal commitment to these values by the wider church has also led to church culture being increasingly shaped accordingly.

Ministry Directed by a Distinctive Model and Strategy for Discipleship

The strategy of Coast Community Church is communicated through the unique and distinctive Tree of Life Discipleship Model.¹ This model seeks to present seven areas

¹ Andrew Ranucci, “Tree of Life Discipleship Model,” (Bensville, NSW: Coast Community Church, 2012).
of discipleship, which provide the pathways to living out one’s discipleship in the Kingdom of God.

The first part of the discipleship model seeks to inspire individuals to develop an intimate relationship with God. The conviction is that discipleship deepens as personal relationship with Jesus grows and develops. This part of the model looks to Jesus for inspiration, by the way he invested time in his relationship with the Father. Mark 1:35 says, “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” Healthy disciples will choose to develop spiritual disciplines and practices in their lives to deepen their personal relationship with Jesus. Spiritual disciplines are explored through attending a range of spiritual retreats hosted by the church. This deep spiritual life is inspired by the Psalmist: “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers” (Ps 1:1-3).

The second part of the discipleship model seeks to encourage individuals to live in deep community with one another. The conviction is that discipleship deepens as individuals build strong and solid spiritual friendships. Such friends will support, challenge and encourage one another on their journey of discipleship. A true spiritual friend will actively assist someone in paying attention to God in all of the various aspects of life. The author of Hebrews writes: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the
habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:24-25). The Apostle Paul also sees great value in mutual spiritual friendships; he writes “I want to see you so I can share some special gift of the Holy Spirit with you. It will make you strong. Both of us need help. I can help make your faith strong and you can do the same for me. We need each other” (Rom 1:11-12).

The truth is, humans are not created to be alone, but designed for community. Jesus chose twelve men to be his spiritual friends and disciples. Healthy disciples will likewise establish a number of deep spiritual friendships, taking the advice of Jesus’ brother James when he writes: “Make this your common practice: confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed” (Jas 5:16, The Message). The development of spiritual friendship is encouraged at Coast Community Church through attending one of a number of small groups.

The third part of the discipleship model seeks to inspire individuals to live authentic and transparent lives with one another. The conviction is that discipleship deepens as individuals develop relationships of accountability with others who will help them stay true to their desire to live in complete obedience to Jesus. Accountability provides strength and courage for the life of a disciple. Mentors or spiritual directors make ideal partners for accountability, giving strength in areas of vulnerability and courage in areas of weakness. Jesus himself developed a deeper relationship with three of his twelve disciples. Jesus often drew away with his closest friends, Peter, James and John (Mt 26:36-46). It seems Jesus was aware of Solomon’s wisdom: “Two are better
than one, because they have a good return for their work; If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!” (Eccl 4:9-10).

Coast Community Church encourages the development of relationships of spiritual accountability through providing mentors and spiritual directors. Another strategy for mutual spiritual accountability is the formation of triplets. Three individuals of the same gender gather together regularly, to develop relationships of mutual support and accountability.

The fourth part of the discipleship model seeks to inspire individuals to use their spiritual gifts to serve others. The conviction is that discipleship is expressed in the way one serves the Kingdom of God. A Kingdom servant is someone who gives herself to others for their benefit through the loving, thoughtful, active promotion of their wellbeing and the cause of God in the world. Disciples of Jesus are inspired by the way Jesus himself served. Jesus demonstrated that service is a function not a status. Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but he made himself a servant, was obedient to his Father and gave his life for humanity (Phil 2:5-11). This servant quality is powerfully displayed when Jesus washed the disciples’ feet and said: “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (Jn 13:15). In Matthew 10, Jesus reminds his followers that every act of service, even small ones, are important: “This is a large work I’ve called you into, but don’t be overwhelmed by it. It’s best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won’t lose out on a thing” (Mt 10:41-42, The Message). Coast Community Church encourages individuals to take on a
life of Kingdom serving, with the notion that any service done for another is viewed as serving Jesus himself: “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40).

The fifth part of the discipleship model seeks to inspire individuals to live as salt and light, so the world can taste and see that the Lord is good. The conviction is that discipleship is also expressed in the way one sows seeds for the Kingdom of God. The New Testament teaches that disciples of Jesus are ambassadors of God with the ministry and message of reconciliation to a lost and broken world (2 Cor 5:17-21). A healthy disciple will actively look for opportunities to sow seeds of the Kingdom through words and actions. The parable of the sower (Mt 13:1-23) reminds disciples they are not responsible for the outcome of the seeds they sow. Individuals will make their own decisions. Nevertheless, disciples are responsible through their witness to look for opportunities to sow seeds. Paul understood it was his job to plant seeds in people’s hearts, but it was the Lord who made those seeds grow: “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So, neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labour. For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building” (1 Cor 3:6-9).

Jesus desires to see a harvest from the seeds planted by his followers. Coast Community Church seeks to provide lots of opportunities for individuals to join teams of service, where seeds of the Kingdom are sown into the community and the world.
The sixth part of the discipleship model seeks to inspire disciples to live as stewards of the Kingdom. The conviction is that discipleship is also expressed in the way people steward the resources God entrusts to them. When God created Adam and Eve he gave them the role of Kingdom stewards, to subdue, rule over, work and take care of all creation (Gn 1:28, 2:15). Unfortunately, since sin entered the world, mankind abandoned the role of Kingdom stewardship and substituted it with the role of owner. As Scott Rodin writes: “The defining mark of this fallenness is the shift in our self-understanding from steward to owner. This is a considerable shift! In defiance of the God who gives us all things freely, we become takers.”²

With ownership comes the desire to build one’s personal kingdom here on earth, a kingdom in which one gains a sense of identity, value and meaning. When Kingdom stewardship is forsaken, the individual becomes the centre of their world. Instead, God calls individuals to seek first his Kingdom and to be a steward of all the resources he provides: time, relationships, physical bodies, income, possessions, minds, talents, abilities and giftings. In Matthew 25:14-30, Jesus uses the parable of the talents to teach the important principal of kingdom stewardship: “The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. ‘Master’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.’ His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’” (Mt 25:20-21).

² R. Scott Rodin, Stewards in the Kingdom (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 102.
The seventh and final part of the discipleship model seeks to inspire disciples to gather and celebrate regularly with their spiritual family—the Church. The conviction is that discipleship both deepens and is expressed through being an active participant in the Body of Christ. Paul explains that the Church is the representation of Christ’s body here on earth (1 Cor 12:12-31). Disciples of Jesus are part of the body: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Cor 12:27). Christians belong to both the global Body of Christ, and the local expression of the body of Christ, the local church. The Church is the community where disciples are designed to belong, be known and to know others. The Church is where disciples contribute using their spiritual gifts. The Apostle Paul writes: “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Rom 12:4-5). God places disciples in local bodies of Christ, and Coast Community Church seeks to help every person to be known, belong and find their unique place of contribution.

The Tree of Life Discipleship Model developed by Coast Community Church seeks to guide the direction and purpose of its ministry.³ The leadership of the church have a strong conviction that as disciples engage with the seven different areas of the model, their lives will track toward being healthy, growing and full of love.

³ Ranucci, “Tree of Life Discipleship Model.”
Led Wisely with a Governance/Ministry Model

Coast Community Church is governed by an eldership board appointed by the congregation. The elders’ role is predominantly focused around governance rather than ministry. This focus helps the elders devote their time to leading the vision of the church with appropriate policy, rather than becoming distracted with ministry issues. This framework of leadership has been inspired by the writings of David Bartlett and Paul Campey: “The board (elders) are elected by the moral owners (congregation) to represent them to fulfil their governance responsibilities. The board needs to think through carefully how they will fulfil these governance responsibilities and are the group of men and women who will have the authority and accountability for delivering the ministry vision.”

The senior pastor sits on the eldership board and reports to the elders. Any ministry issues are delegated to the senior pastor, who then follows through with the ministry team of the church, which are predominantly paid staff. The ministry team oversee the day-to-day ministry of the church and the senior pastor leads this team according to the vision and policies developed by the eldership.

This leadership model allows for healthy separation between the responsibilities of the eldership board and the ministry team. The eldership board understand that any ministry issues need to be directed to the ministry team and the ministry team understand

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4 Coast Community Church, *Constitution of Coast Community Church – Section 5* (Bensville, NSW: Coast Community Church, 2015).

that any governance issues are directed to the eldership board. This clarity of roles and functions has led to a healthy and uncomplicated leadership structure, which promotes the progress of the vision and the development of a variety of ministry initiatives.

A Church for all Ages

Coast Community Church has managed to develop a ministry which encompasses age groups from newborns to those in their nineties. Appropriate ministries are developed to engage various age groups, whilst creating places of belonging and community. Though there are age specific ministries, effort is also made to develop opportunities for the ages to come together. Spiritual Retreats are a great example where it is not uncommon to see young adults rubbing shoulders with those in the latter years of life.

Demographics of the Church Congregation

Coast Community Church represents all the ages with a predominance of families with children. There are a total of 717 active people within the church, which is represented by 192 children under the age of twelve. The children represent 27 percent of the total congregation. Teenagers fall to 10 percent of the church or seventy-one individuals. Sadly, in keeping with the census data for the Central Coast, there is not a proliferation of young adults, as many relocate to Sydney to either attend University or look for employment opportunities. There are only thirty active young adults, which represents just 4 percent of the total congregation. Adults make up the majority, with 424 individuals, 59 percent of the church family. There are more women than men with 183

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6 Australian Bureau of Statistics, “2016 Census QuickStats Central Coast NSW.”

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men and 241 women, or 43 percent and 57 percent of adults respectively. Unfortunately, the church database is unable to identify the older demographics within the adult figures, a rough estimate would suggest that 25 percent of all adults are over the age of sixty-five.

Range of Ministries

There are a variety of ministries across Coast Community Church, which appeal to a wide range of ages and life stages. Some ministries are designed to appeal to those in the community who are yet to step through the doors of the church. Others are created to nurture and deepen the faith of those who have been disciples of Jesus for many years.

Children are well catered for with a specialised Sunday morning program called Kids Connection, which complements Sunday church services. Kids Connection follows a curriculum, which teaches 3-to-12-year-olds the foundation of the Christian faith. Pre-school aged children are catered for with a crèche during Sunday church services as well as two midweek programs. Mainly Music and Play Group run through the week and accommodate parents and pre-school aged children. These ministries are designed to develop community amongst young parents and a cohort of friends for the children.

Programs for teenagers include a weekly youth group designed to evangelise and disciple young people and address current issues relating to their demographic. Weekly small groups are also held and provide valued community and mutual support for teenagers wrestling with issues of life and faith. The Sunday evening service is also designed to appeal to teenagers, with relevant music style and sermon topics designed to relate to this age group. The Sunday evening service also includes a high involvement by teenagers.
Families are catered for with age appropriate programs complementing church services. Through this, parents can enjoy the freedom to engage in worship, teaching, communion and fellowship without the distraction of keeping children entertained. A variety of small groups also exist where families can develop supportive relationships with others in the same life stage.

Adults are ministered to with programs, which target those who are both married and single, from marriage seminars and singles events. A Bible College Diploma is also offered for those desiring deeper Bible study. Gender specific ministries are also offered to serve the needs and interests of men and women. Some men’s events are designed to create a space where men can invite their unbelieving friends to interact socially. Other men’s events are designed to inspire and challenge men with living out their faith in their marriage, parenting, workplace and business. Specialised women’s events are also designed to create opportunities for women to invite their friends from the community into the life of the church. Other women’s events include weekly gatherings for Bible study, prayer and support.

The elderly are likewise catered for through midweek small group Bible studies to monthly social events. The Elderly are valued at Coast Community Church and are often called on as mentors and teachers. The elderly are also active volunteers in the life of the church, from serving on hospitality teams to meeting weekly in a craft group sewing sanitation kits for women in the third world.
A Culture of Spiritual Retreats

Since 2008, spiritual retreats have been a major discipleship strategy in the life of the church. The spiritual retreats were designed to encourage followers of Jesus to learn and experiment with various spiritual disciplines which Jesus himself practised. The notion is that if people want to become more like Jesus, then they ought to engage with the various spiritual practices which they see Jesus himself engaging with. The retreats are designed to not only give individuals teaching on the topic, but opportunity to also experiment with the discipline, within a supportive environment.

Development of the Spiritual Retreats Ministry

So far there are six different retreats, which are offered to the church community. All of the retreats are offered each year for both men and women to attend. Below is a summary of each retreat.

The first is the Solitude and Silence Retreat. This is an introductory retreat, which explores the foundation for spiritual formation, as well as the two fundamental disciplines of the spiritual life—solitude and silence. These two disciplines were practiced regularly by Jesus. Jesus often rose early in the morning to seek a solitary place to pray (Mk 1:35). These two disciplines establish a deep foundation for the growth of life with God.

Next is the Simplicity Retreat. This retreat explores how much simpler life can become, once discovering the secret of living according to one’s primary purpose - God and his Kingdom. Jesus lived with a clear vision before him and this helped him prioritise his life accordingly. This retreat begins by exploring the importance of inward simplicity. Aligning one’s life with his primary purpose in life then helps him move to the more
practical outward simplicity. The exploration of this discipline not only helps individuals to unclutter their souls, but to also unclutter their lives.

The third retreat is the Sabbath Retreat. This retreat explores God’s gift of the Sabbath, dating back to the book of Genesis. Interestingly, Jesus lived with this Sabbath rhythm, and reminded his followers that the “Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mk 2:27). This retreat explores the desperate need people are in today, for rediscovering the joy and peace of a regular Sabbath. The desire is to see individuals gain a vision for entering into this rhythm of work and rest, not through legalism, obligation and duty, but through freedom, joy and delight.

There is also a Fasting Retreat. This retreat explores not only the way Jesus practiced fasting, but also the reasons behind his fasting. It investigates how fasting is less about lack and going without and more about feasting on God. During this retreat participants will consider what their deepest hungers are and have an opportunity to experiment with fasting in a safe and supportive environment. Many have discovered a new freedom through fasting, leaving the retreat with a greater awareness of those things which control them and a deeper appetite and hunger for God.

A fifth retreat is the Conversational Prayer Retreat. This retreat is designed to teach participants to pray with greater spontaneity and transparency, as they develop a growing relationship with the Trinity. Conversational prayer is essential for developing an intimate and interactive relationship with God. Jesus was often found praying without a filter, such as the scene in the garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:36-39). This retreat
focuses on deepening life with God through developing a more transparent and vulnerable prayer life.

The final retreat is a Rhythms of Life Retreat. This retreat seeks to explore how individuals can intentionally arrange their lives around the goal of spiritual transformation. The retreat guides participants in developing a realistic rule of life, where the various spiritual disciplines and practices can come together to form a healthy spiritual rhythm. The hope is for participants to leave the retreat, having developed a plan for themselves, as they seek to formulate a sustainable rhythm with the spiritual disciplines, leading to freedom and fullness of life with God.

The Need and Obstacles to Discernment

Discernment is often sought by those at the crossroads of life seeking to make important decisions in light of God’s will. Decisions can certainly determine the destiny and direction of one’s life. For instance, a decision to accept a job offer in another city will determine where one lives, the church one will attend, the schools and sporting clubs children will be involved in and most likely the friends one will develop. The bigger the decision, the greater the consequences, and thus greater the imperative to discern well.

There are numerous obstacles to discerning the will of God, which this project will further explore and seek to overcome. Broadly speaking, there are at least three obstacles one needs to acknowledge when considering important decisions. The first relates to the question of orientation and arises when one is oblivious to God’s calling. Discerning God’s will, requires an awareness of God’s calling and an ability to discern if a decision either orients one’s life to her calling or leads her elsewhere. The second
relates to the subject of inclination, particularly the inclinations of the heart. One’s heart can tempt him toward making decisions, which appeal to his ego rather than his calling, to short-term delights, rather than long-term goals. The third relates to captivation and the danger of making something central in life, which ought to be peripheral. Obstacles to discernment come far and wide; the Spiritual Discernment Retreat will seek to address these obstacles and more. The hope is for individuals to gain the clarity and conviction required to decide in keeping with their discernment of God’s will.

The Opportunities for a Discernment Retreat

The Spiritual Discernment Retreat will be offered annually alongside the six already established retreats in the life of Coast Community Church. Discerning the will of God takes time and dedicated attention, thus it seems fanciful to seek to achieve discernment during a weekend alone. For this reason, the discernment retreat is an expanded experience designed with two weeks of preceding preparation and succeeded with a week of confirmation. If the three-week discernment journey does not lead to clarity, participants are encouraged to continue the discernment pilgrimage. The daily practices, journaling, prayer and reflections can form an ongoing listening posture until discernment is reached. The discernment retreat will teach participants timeless principles founded in the Bible and synthesized by the desert dwellers, Ignatius and Willard. These principles are designed to do more than assist individuals with a decision they are considering on the retreat. These principles are designed to lay a foundation for ongoing wisdom and awareness of one’s calling and direction in life.
PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
CHAPTER THREE
LITERATURE REVIEW

The desert dwellers, Ignatius and Willard all contribute widely to the discussion on discernment and the necessary steps for an individual to discern the will of God. This section will examine a range of books from these three traditions. They provide essential foundational thinking for the development of the Spiritual Discernment Retreat.

Writings of the Desert Dwellers

*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* by Benedicta Ward

*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* is Benedicta Ward’s compilation of the words spoken by the fourth century ascetics who fled to the desert. These fathers (and some mothers) were sought out by faithful Christians of the time, for their words of wisdom and discernment. These historical words or sayings, collected and compiled by Ward, contribute valuable wisdom for the Spiritual Discernment Retreat.

*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* cover a variety of topics relating to the spiritual life. These words of wisdom, spoken to those seeking out these desert ascetics in the fourth century, provide a variety of wisdom applicable to discerning the will of God.
Ward records: “Abba Poeman said that Abba Ammonas said, ‘A man can spend his whole time carrying an axe without succeeding in cutting down the tree; while another, with experience of tree-felling brings the tree down with a few blows. He said that the axe is discernment.’”¹ The Saying of the Desert Fathers is a valuable book, recording these precious writings. A summary of the main themes of the book can be simplified down to five core concepts.

The first is the importance of not making central what ought to be peripheral. Abba Poeman advises: “Do not give your heart to that which does not satisfy the heart.”² The enemy seeks to distract people with peripheral matters and cloud the ability to discern the will of God by giving peripheral things too much focus. A wise and discerning person will notice the difference between daily necessities and occasional pleasures and live accordingly. “Wisdom is proved right by her deeds” (Mt 11:19b), writes Matthew the Apostle.

Second, the desert dwellers chose to live simply, where needs are met and excesses avoided. These fathers and mothers of the faith encourage pursuing simplicity and helping readers approach discernment from a position of contentment. Covetousness can confuse one’s ability to discern the will of God, as it can lead him to comparing himself with others. Ward recounts, “Abba Poeman said that a brother who lived with some other brothers asked Abba Bessarion, ‘What ought I to do?’ The old man said to

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² Ibid., 178.
him ‘Keep silence and do not always be comparing yourself with others.’ Such wisdom will help one avoid a decision led by greed and covetousness.

Next, when facing decisions, people can be tempted to choose that which will feed their egos. The desert dwellers advise addressing the passion of vainglory, by seeking anonymity and humility. Seeking to discern the will of God through the lens of humility will help one avoid making self-centred decisions, designed to massage her ego. Ward records Abba Poeman saying: “As the breath comes out of his nostrils, so does a man need humility and the fear of God.” This advice will encourage people to approach their discernment journey from a position of humility.

Fourth, the desert dwellers encourage avoiding taking the easy solution when seeking discernment. Ward records Abba Paesius suggesting: “If a monk can overcome two things, he can become free from the world. His brother asked him what these two things were and he said bodily ease and vainglory.” Seeking an easy solution can be appealing. It takes less work and the decision-making struggle is over with. Nevertheless, the easy solution may indeed be the wrong solution. A desire for mental and bodily ease may do someone a disservice. Ward records Abba Poeman once saying: “When self-will and ease become habitual, they overthrow a man.” Confronting the easy solution may help prevent one from being influenced by the temptation for expedient and convenient decisions, which may jeopardise the ability to discern God’s will.

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3 Ibid., 178.
4 Ibid., 173.
5 Ibid., 176.
6 Ibid., 178.
Finally, the desert dwellers encourage making a decision with regards to the way Scripture is shaping one’s life. The more time spent in Scripture, the more one’s heart and mind will be shaped by it. The desert dwellers sought the wisdom of the Scriptures in everything they did. Someone asked Abba Anthony, “‘What must one do in order to please God?’ The old man replied ‘Pay attention to what I tell you: whoever you may be, always have God before your eyes; whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the holy Scriptures; in whatever place you live, do not easily leave it. Keep these three precepts and you will be saved.’”7 Abba Anthony reminds readers to value the way Scripture can shape their thinking for a discernment journey.

The Sayings of the Desert Fathers is a valued contribution to the sources required for the development of a Spiritual Discernment Retreat. These sayings, representing the wisdom of the fourth century, provide beneficial wisdom from the advice these ascetics gave, to those who sought them out. The limitation of these writings, relate to the age in which they were written. There are issues today that the ancients never faced, which they do not address. Nevertheless, many of the principles within these writings are timeless and can be applied across cultures and time.

Desert Christians by William Harmless

It is easy to understand why students of early Christian writings have sought out William Harmless’ book Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monastics as a textbook. Harmless offers a comprehensive overview of Christian writings birthed in the Egyptian desert in the fourth and fifth century. He sets the scene by

7 Ibid., 2.
offering the basics on geography, history, politics and the religious environment of the period. Harmless then explores some of the most important contributors and texts of this period including: Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*; the *Lives of Pachomius*; the *Apophthegmata Patrum*; the *History of the Monks in Egypt* and Palladius’ *Lausiac History*. Harmless also gives extensive attention to the works of Evagrius Ponticus and John Cassian.

Harmless offers many insights from the writings of the desert dwellers, which help shape the discernment journey offered through this project. Firstly, Harmless recognises why the desert dwellers valued solitude: “According to Athanasius, Antony’s wisdom stemmed from more than shrewd native intelligence. It came from mysterious illuminations he received while in his mountain solitude.” As a result of this growing wisdom, Antony was often sought by philosophers and judges. Even emperors such as Constantine and his two sons sent him letters. Ammonas, a disciple of Antony who became one of his successors, continued to encourage his students to seek out desert solitude. Ammonas writes “The soul cannot know God unless it withdraws itself from men and from every distraction.”

Secondly, Harmless points out that discernment of spirits, though popularised by Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* many years later, was brought to light for the purpose of discernment originally by Antony. This is another example of the wisdom on discernment gained in the desert. Harmless expands and quotes directly from Antony’s

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9 Ibid., 82.

writings:

The Monk needed to know if a voice or a vision was from God or from demons. In his speech, Antony set out principles for making such discernment. Evil spirits he noted, are noisy - crashing, shouting, creating the “sort of disturbance one might expect from tough youths and robbers.” The best measure was the emotions that a voice or a vision stirred up in a monk’s soul. Demons inspired only negative affects: “terror, confusion and disorder of thoughts, dejection, enmity towards ascetics, listlessness, grief, memory of relatives, fear of death.” Angelic spirits, by contrast, stirred up very different emotions: “tranquillity, joy, delight, courage, peacefulness.”

Understanding the differences between the way evil spirits communicate, as opposed to the angelic or good spirits, certainly assists the one seeking to discern God’s voice. The enemy has an entirely different ambition: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy” (Jn 10:10). His desire to derail one’s attempts to discern the will of God can be thwarted by an understanding of the nuances of how he works.

Thirdly, Harmless highlights the way desert dwellers gained wisdom on discernment by looking toward nature, as a way to hear from God. Harmless quotes from Evagrius Ponticus in Praktikos:

A certain member of what was then considered the circle of the wise once approached the just Antony and asked him: “How do you ever manage to carry on, Father, deprived as you are of the consolation of books?” His reply: “My book, sir philosopher, is the nature of created things, and it is always at hand when I wish to read the words of God.” (Praktikos 92 SC171:694: trans. John Eudes Bamberger, CS 4:39)

By spending prolonged periods in nature, the desert dwellers became increasingly attuned to the way God was able to reveal himself to them through the created order.

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11 Harmless, Desert Christians, 87.

12 Ibid., 109.
Fourthly, Harmless notes how the desert dwellers began the practice of what today is more widely called, spiritual direction. Monks often sought out their spiritual seniors called Abbas to confess their thoughts and seek a word of interpretation, understanding or guidance. He writes, “The cell was the crucible where the monk did his interior work. But what happened to him there, particularly if he was young or new to the desert, he was expected to discuss with an Abba. This was the discipline of the ‘manifestation of thoughts.’”\(^{13}\) The thoughts that monks brought to their Abba varied; it could be a desire or a feeling, missing one’s family, possibly even questioning one’s capacity to be a monk: “The Abba helped the monk discern the ‘thought,’ whether it was good, evil or neutral, whether it should be acted upon, ignored, or fought against. This dynamic was not so much private confession as spiritual direction.”\(^{14}\)

Monks were expected to manifest their thoughts fairly regularly; in fact, Abba Paphnutius reported he went to see his elders twice each month. He must have sincerely valued this practice, as it was a twelve-mile walk each way.\(^ {15}\) Abba Moses stresses in *Conference I* the importance for monks to seek spiritual direction in order to ascertain the genesis of their thoughts: “Monks need to learn the fine art of discernment, to sort through the inner stream of thoughts and discern their origin, whether they arise from God, from the devil or from themselves.”\(^ {16}\) Understanding the origin of one’s thoughts help her discern whether she ought to discard them or give them serious attention.

\(^ {13}\) Ibid., 229.

\(^ {14}\) Ibid., 230.

\(^ {15}\) Ibid., 230.

\(^ {16}\) Ibid., 390.
Fifthly, Harmless surmises from the writings of Evagrius Ponticus, that the end goal for desert dwellers is love. In fact, the end goal for life itself is love: “Ultimately, the ascetic life makes one free to love others free of subtle compulsions and hidden agenda. It also means loving others as they really are.”\(^{17}\) This focus on the importance of love is sound advice for one seeking to discern the will of God. God will most likely lead his people according to the most loving response, opportunity and trajectory.

*Desert Christians* by William Harmless is a valued text introducing the literature of the desert dwellers and key thoughts and teachings of these early monastics. These early men and women fashioned techniques of prayer, asceticism and devotional practices which have remained central to followers of Christ ever since. Their development of the ministry of spiritual direction forged a whole new approach to discipleship, which has brought wisdom, insight and discernment to generations of Christians over the last two millennia. The limitation of *Desert Christians* remains entwined with the need to appreciate the culture these early monastics lived in, nearly two millenniums ago. Harmless does an admirable job at interpreting the relevancy of their learnings for today, but one must often filter this through an early Egyptian lens.

**Writings on Ignatian Spirituality**

*Discovering Your Personal Vocation* by Herbert Alphonso

Herbert Alphonso is a Jesuit priest who connects the discernment of God’s will for people’s lives with discovering their personal calling. Alphonso writes, “One way in which I can understand God’s will . . . is certainly the state of life to which I am called by

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\(^{17}\) Ibid., 348.
God.” Alphonso, through the lens of Ignatian spirituality, contributes an important piece of wisdom into the process of discerning the will of God. In essence, he writes on the wisdom of understanding how a decision relates to one’s personal vocational calling. Alphonso asserts that that the most radical revelation, as it relates to discerning the will of God, will rise as one discovers “God’s personal plan and design for me, if not my God given uniqueness, my deepest and truest self, my personal vocation”.

Alphonso’s main argument includes the assertion that God has made each one a unique being. God views people as individuals, calling them by name. Uniqueness means having a personal identity and thus “a personal orientation in life.” One’s journey of discernment needs to include a growing awareness of the profound and true self, for this will determine the direction of his life and thus the decisions he makes.

Alphonso states that personal vocation is not on the level of doing, but on the level of being. Vocation often is understood these days in terms of function, but as one moves beyond function she discovers a deeper calling that relates to identity. When faced with important decisions, understanding who God made her to be, will help her on her journey of discerning the will of God. Alphonso’s separation between being and doing, opens up opportunities to pursue one’s calling (being), whilst being involved in activities (doing), which may not necessarily complement one’s vocation. Alphonso writes, “If my meaning in life does indeed lie on the level of being, far deeper and more radical than on

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19 Ibid., 8.
20 Ibid., 9.
the plane of doing, where I function, then I can find profound meaning in anything that is entrusted to me.”

Discerning one’s personal vocation is an important step in determining the orientation of his life, which in turn will help guide the decisions he makes. Thus, Alphonso helps the reader to consider their truest and deepest self, by contemplating “the disposition, the ordering, the arrangement and the orientation of his/her life.” This contemplation will help reveal one’s truest and deepest self, the unique name by which God calls him, his personal vocation. Once this is discovered, Alphonso states that often this will be of no great surprise. When one’s life is considered in review, he will be able to trace the threads of his personal vocation, through the various stages of his life.

Alphonso ties personal vocation in life with pursuit and experience of meaning. Decisions will often reflect one’s desire for meaning. Understanding vocation will help people make decisions within the context of their pursuit for meaning. Alphonso adds, “We never get bored with meaning: in fact, along life’s pilgrimage we keep shedding what is meaningless, but hold on to what is meaningful. What happened to meaning is that it keeps on becoming ever more deeply meaningful. If such, in general, is the import of ‘meaning,’ what shall we say of the radical and unique God-given meaning in one’s life that is one’s personal vocation.”

21 Ibid., 29.
22 Ibid., 33.
23 Ibid., 40.
Alphonso’s work contributes valuable wisdom for the discernment process, for one’s calling is central to the determination of God’s will in decision making, no matter how small or large the decision. One’s calling is the lens through which she can view every decision she makes in life. Alphonso affirms:

I am convinced that the personal vocation, once discerned, becomes the criterion of discernment for every decision in life, even for the daily details of decision making. For my personal vocation is for me “God’s will” in the deepest theological meaning of this much-repeated and much-misused phrase. If then I am faced with a choice between two alternatives, it is my personal vocation that will help me decide through discernment which alternative is God’s call, God’s will for me.\(^{24}\)

Alphonso’s wisdom on vocational calling is a profound and important contribution to the discernment of God’s will. Nevertheless, a limitation is presented when a decision for consideration arises between two alternatives and both could be considered within the realm of one’s calling. More work on discernment needs to be done when faced with this situation. For this reason, Alphonso’s work has limits, nevertheless his wisdom will be a valued contribution to the Spiritual Discernment Retreat.

*Discerning the Will of God* by Timothy Gallagher

Timothy Gallagher, a Catholic priest and member of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary, presents an overview of the Ignatian approach to decision making. Gallagher leads his readers through a systematic process, inspired by Ignatius. This process includes: letting go of attachments; opening one’s heart to all possibilities; the discipline of silence; a thoughtful reading of Scripture; noticing consolation and desolation; pursuing clarity and meeting with a spiritual director.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 43.
Gallagher explores the importance of maintaining an open and free disposition when seeking to discern the will of God. A willingness to consider any possibility helps one enter the discernment process without a bias toward one answer over another. Gallagher recognises the great value of an open disposition, where one is able to say: Whatever happens, however God leads, I want to say yes. Regarding such a disposition, Gallagher writes: “This openness to God, without which discernment cannot be made, cannot be taken for granted. In fact, in his Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius prepares us for discernment primarily through the quest for this openness.”

In exploring Ignatius’ approach to discernment, Gallagher writes that Ignatius viewed a close relationship with Jesus as central to discerning his will for one’s life. For this reason, Ignatius spends much time in the Spiritual Exercises, contemplating the life of Jesus in the Gospels. Through the Exercises, Ignatius’ intention is for us to fall in love with Jesus: “If we are to discern well, we must come to know Jesus deeply, personally, intimately, so that we may love him more closely in our choices (Spir Ex 104).”

Ignatius requires a series of spiritual exercises, activities or means that one undertake to prepare herself for the discernment process. Gallagher writes: “Wise use of these means, he (Ignatius) tells us, disposes our hearts to discern well.” These means include practicing the Eucharist—a place of deep encounter with Christ. Gallagher writes: “The Eucharist fosters new closeness to Christ and awakens questions of discernment. . . .

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26 Ibid., 48.

27 Ibid., 50.
Prayer before the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament gradually awakens the disposition that permits discernment.”28 The Eucharist invites people to enter intimately into the presence of Jesus. Such times of close communion create the atmosphere in which they can more easily discern his will for their lives. The Eucharist will be a valuable element of the Spiritual Discernment Retreat.

Ignatius views discernment as a response to Christ (Spir Ex 91-98). In Ignatian discernment, Scripture plays an important role. The contemplation of Christ in the Gospels, is seen as an ideal preparation for discernment for it invites one to interact with Jesus in the narratives of the Gospels. The practice of silence is another means by which people are drawn into the presence of Jesus. In silence one begins to notice God’s voice. Gallagher writes, “Silence . . . allows us to hear the ‘still small voice’ (1 Kings 19:12) in which God speaks to the human heart.”29 This is an important contribution to the Spiritual Discernment Retreat, for a retreat offers the ideal setting for one to experience silence, which can be quite elusive in one’s busy and noisy lives. This is especially true when living in urban settings.

Gallagher agrees that a retreat is a wise means for seeking God for discernment: “Evidently, for Ignatius, a retreat is the ideal setting for a discernment of significance.”30 Seeking out a spiritual director is yet another means by which discernment is sought. Ignatius understood the value of sharing the discernment journey with a spiritual guide.

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28 Ibid., 52.
29 Ibid., 55.
30 Ibid., 56.
Discernment is best not done alone. People are wise to share the journey with someone they trust, someone who will help them process their ponderings. Gallagher adds, “When those who discern are unsure, feel blocked, and do not know how to proceed, often the need is for wise accompaniment.”

The first half of the book is spent on preparation for discernment and most of the second half is spent on the actual discernment process. Gallagher simplifies the discernment process down to Ignatius’ three modes. He calls these modes clarity beyond doubting, an attraction of the heart and a preponderance of reasons. The first mode of discernment, is the easiest way to make a decision. In clarity beyond doubting, God reveals without a shadow of a doubt, the direction one should take. The will is drawn in an obvious way: “There is no extended process of discernment in this experience . . . if God chooses to give this gift of clarity, our part is to accept and act upon it.” When this gift is not one’s experience, then he needs to move on to the second mode of discernment.

When there is no absolute clarity, Gallagher invites choosing Ignatius’ second mode, an attraction of the heart. During this second mode, the aim is to become attentive to one’s interior experience; she begins by noticing the consolation associated with that which her heart is drawn toward. This process of discernment requires a period of time, a number of days of tuning into her heart and noticing how it is being drawn. Ignatius advises the accompaniment of a spiritual director or guide, through this discernment stage: “Discernment according to the second mode presumes, then, that the one discerning,

31 Ibid., 62.
32 Ibid., 71.
understand and recognise experiences of spiritual consolation and desolation. Ignatius insists, therefore, that these ‘should be well explained’ by the spiritual guide to the one discerning.”

Sharing interior movements of consolation and desolation with a spiritual director will help in processing their meaning. This processing may provide the clarity needed to discern the direction one’s heart is being drawn.

If the second mode of discernment still leaves one without conviction, it may be time to turn to Ignatius’ third mode of discernment. Gallagher names this a preponderance of reasons. This mode begins with freedom from attachments, leading to a calm and tranquil heart. The third mode follows a series of exercises, such as: clarifying the questions; listing the advantages and disadvantages of both sides of a decision; considering the decision in light of one’s death bed; seeking to live as though he had made a decision and noticing his inner movements of consolation or desolation; the presence of peace or otherwise. Gallagher writes, “Ignatius’ teaching on third mode discernment highlights God’s desire that we engage our natural, human capabilities in discernment. That teaching offers us a wise and efficacious manner of proceeding as we employ these God-given abilities.”

Gallagher provides a helpful overview of the Ignatian discernment process, which contributes to the fundamental principles and practices of the Spiritual Discernment Retreat. The various modes of discernment will be a helpful aid for those who find themselves at different stages in their discernment journey. The limitation associated with

33 Ibid., 87.
34 Ibid., 120.
this particular book is the lack of depth in explaining and understanding each discernment mode. Though this book provides a great overview, a more in-depth understanding will need to be sourced from further works on Ignatian discernment.

_Weeds Among the Wheat_ by Thomas H. Green

In the book _Weeds Among the Wheat_, Thomas Green encourages approaching discernment through a growing relationship of intimacy with the Father. Green asserts that the more deeply one knows the Lord, the easier it will be to read his face and sense his desires. Green not only invites the reader to explore various ways in which God speaks, through the good things in life—the wheat—but he also helps him recognize the intertwined weeds, which can distract and undermine one’s capacity to discern God’s leading. Green writes, “In terms of Christian discernment and decision making, the weeds and the wheat represent the mix of diverse inspirations and attachments—eg., the genuine love of God entangled with self-love and self-seeking, even in the most generous and zealous of apostles—which complicates the art of discernment even for those who are truly committed and mature.”

Green frames the book with three parts: Preparing the Soil, Sowing the Good Seed and A Mixed Harvest.

In Preparing the Soil, Green begins with exploring the nature of discernment and Jesus’ own approach to discerning his Father’s will. He writes, “Jesus’ discernment was unerring because he was totally open to the Spirit. The Holy Spirit could guide him according to the Father’s will, even when this will, was obscure and unclear to Jesus’ human understanding, because he was a man without sin, without disordered

35 Thomas Green, _Weeds Among the Wheat_ (Notre Dame, IN: Ava Maria Press, 2005), 15.
Green also explores how the Apostle Peter’s approach to discernment, had less to do with a formula, and more to do with a person:

Peter answers for the Twelve when Jesus asks if they too will go away. His reply is: “Lord, whom shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we know that you are the Holy One of God.” In effect, Peter chooses not Jesus’ doctrine but Jesus himself. It is as if he said, “Lord, I don’t understand any more than the others. But I trust you. Whatever you say, I accept, because you say it.”

Peter trusted the person of Jesus and his discernment was shaped by this relationship. Green suggests, that the more one comes to know Jesus through the Gospels, the more she will also come to know his heart and desires for her. Green also provides three important presuppositions for preparing the soil of the heart for discernment: a desire to do God’s will, openness to God and knowledge of God.

In Sowing the Good Seed Green turns to Ignatius’ teaching on the discernment process. This process includes: developing a complete openness to whatever God might want in the decision being considered; noticing and working with inner feelings of consolation and desolation, both true and false; and understanding how the good and evil spirits work. Green writes that the whole person is involved in the discernment process and one’s feelings are immeasurably valuable in discerning God’s guidance:

We can thus say that discernment involves the whole person: feelings, intellect and will. The feelings are the raw material which we discern; it is the intellect.

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36 Ibid., 47.
37 Ibid., 49.
38 Ibid., 81.
39 Ibid., 88.
40 Ibid., 103.
which judges the source and validity of these feelings; and it is the will which is moved to act on the basis of this judgement. Without the feelings, the whole process of discernment has no content.\textsuperscript{41}

In A Mixed Harvest Green explains the varying ways in which the enemy seeks to undermine God’s guidance by bringing false consolations. Green provides helpful answers for the discernment journey: “That God would seek to lead the soul to grow in love and generosity by means of consolation seems quite evident. But why would the evil spirit give the soul peace, joy and love, or at least seek to counterfeit these gifts?”\textsuperscript{42} Green also quotes wisdom from Ignatius which helps the reader to understand the way the enemy tries to confuse someone as he seeks to discern God’s will.\textsuperscript{43}

\textit{Weeds Among the Wheat} offers a valuable contribution toward the foundational material required for the Spiritual Discernment Retreat. The limitation of the book has to do with the way Green approaches the use of Scripture for the discernment journey. Green encourages the use of Scripture, as a way of acquainting oneself with the way various characters in the Bible successfully discerned the will of God. Green could have gone further by additionally exploring ways in which biblical characters incorrectly discerned the will of God. This could have provided a series of helpful warnings.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 136.
Hearing God provides some practical principles on how to stay in touch with the Spirit of God. Willard encourages living lives of discernment. Guidance and direction in life is an outcome of an interactive life with God and Willard teaches ways to develop a growing friendship with God, leading to an ability to discern his will for one’s life.

Hearing God provides a practical understanding for hearing God’s voice. He writes of the primary importance of aligning one’s life with the Kingdom of God: “Hearing God makes sense only in the framework of a larger life of being in the will God.”

Guidelines for hearing God include a posture of humility: “In seeking and receiving guidance, therefore, we must at the same time seek and receive the grace of humility.” Presumption is a certain roadblock to hearing the voice of God, as it alienates one from the humility required to submit herself to his will over her own. King David learned this lesson the hard way and thus reflected: “He guides the humble in what is right, and teaches them his ways” (Ps 25:9).

Willard accepts that God speaks through Scripture, but he is not limited to Scripture. Scripture provides a broad understanding of God’s principles: “I happily insist that, so far as principles are concerned, the Bible says all that needs to be said or can be

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45 Ibid., xi.

46 Ibid., 25.
Yet, there are many issues in life, which are not directly addressed by Scripture. In many cases a scriptural principle may give the answer one is looking for. Nevertheless, there may be times when there is no scriptural principal for a unique situation. For times like these, people need to seek out God’s unique and personal leading. Sometimes God will guide through the Bible and at other times he will guide in other ways. Willard writes, “The Bible is the unique, infallible, written Word of God, but the word of God is not just the Bible.”

When specific guidance is required, Willard encourages listening for the still small voice of God. He uses scriptural examples to explain that God’s voice can be heard in numerous ways including: phenomenon plus a voice; a supernatural messenger or angel; dreams and visions; an audible voice; the human voice; the human spirit or the “still small voice.” Willard, in a further chapter, explores the ways one can recognise God’s voice when it comes through one of these many forms. He writes, “There are certain factors which distinguish the individual voice of God, just as with any human voice.” Willard describes three nuances of God’s voice. First, is the weight of God’s voice. There is a certain quality of authority in God’s voice, which carries a steady and calm force that impacts one’s innermost being. Second, is the spirit of God’s voice; a “spirit of exalted peacefulness and confidence, of joy, of sweet reasonableness, and of

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47 Ibid., 47.
48 Ibid., 135.
49 Ibid., 82.
50 Ibid., 168.
Willard writes that the nature of God’s voice is described by Jesus’ own brother, who naturally became accustomed to the spirit of Jesus’ voice. James 3:17 says, “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.” Finally, is the content of God’s voice. God’s voice will always be consistent with the truth about God and his Kingdom as revealed in Scripture: “Any content or claim which does not conform to biblical content is not a word from God. Period!”

_Hearing God_ contributes toward the Spiritual Discernment Retreat in many ways. These include: an understanding of the various ways God speaks, the importance of scriptural principles when pursuing guidance and the particular nuance of God’s voice. Willard provides valuable practical wisdom, which helps in discerning whether indeed God is the one speaking.

Limitations will exist in most texts and certainly _Hearing God_ will not provide the complete solution for a discernment journey. _Hearing God_ does not go far enough in addressing the nature of discerning the voice of God within the context of one’s calling. It does not seem to challenge enough on the importance of the orientation of one’s life, and how this impacts the discernment journey. Nevertheless, within a selection of books for this project, Willard provides important wisdom for the discernment of God’s will, particularly as it relates to hearing God’s voice.

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51 Ibid., 171.

52 Ibid., 172.
Knowing Christ Today by Dallas Willard

Willard, in Knowing Christ Today presents a defence of Christian faith by arguing that the truths found in Scripture are reliable sources of knowledge comparable to other intellectual disciplines, such as philosophy and science. He writes in his introduction: “My hope here is to enable intellectually serious people, Christian or not, to understand the indispensable role of knowledge in faith and life. I also want to make it clear that there is a body of uniquely Christian knowledge, one that is available to all who would appropriately seek it and receive it.”

One of the convictions Willard carries through the book is the dilemma caused by the disparity between belief and knowledge. When these are divergent, the gap between profession and behaviour widen. He writes: “The difference between belief and knowledge is huge and affects every area of life. Not having knowledge of the central truths of Christianity is certainly one the reason for the great disparity between what Christians profess and how they behave – a well-known and disturbing phenomenon.”

The importance of knowledge is that it undergirds faith, giving it substance and depth. This is needed if one’s beliefs are to move her beyond lip service profession to faith-filled behaviour. Discerning the will of God is made redundant if she is not prepared to act on that discernment. Willard writes: “Faith is commitment to action, often beyond our natural abilities, based upon knowledge of God and God’s ways.”

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54 Ibid., 15.
55 Ibid., 20.
belief alone is that one can easily believe what is false. If knowledge educates beliefs and behaviour reflects actual beliefs, then one will live like God really does exist. If she believes that the Bible is God’s word to her, then she will read it and actually live her life according to its teaching, its promises and wisdom.

Willard also brings attention to the danger of rejecting knowledge and reminds the reader of the prophet Hosea’s words: “My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children” (Hos 4:6). He comments: “We can fail to know because we do not want to know – because what would be known would require us to believe and act in ways contrary to what we want.”

Sadly, knowledge is sometimes avoided and rejected because it is more convenient. The way it unfolds is that knowledge results in awareness and awareness results in responsibility. If there is a desire not to be inconvenienced by responsibility, it may be easier to choose avoidance over knowledge. Willard speaks directly into one of the problems one faces when discerning the will of God. Any knowledge one is seeking to avoid could be the knowledge instrumental to discerning a future direction. Discerning the will of God requires choosing knowledge, even when it is inconvenient or undesirable.

Willard reminds the reader that love, through its actions, is the supreme manifestation of the knowledge of God. Such love does not necessarily need to be heroic acts of self-sacrifice. He explains: “But when Jesus speaks of love as the principle of life as it ought to be, he is referring mainly to the posture of benefitting others in the ordinary

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56 Ibid., 40.
relations of ordinary life.” Jesus himself plainly states, “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Mt 7:12). The natural side effect of treating others the way one would like to be treated is that she will also be doing what was good and right by the moral dimension of the Mosaic law. Love always travels beyond the obligation of the law; it is covenantal rather than contractual. One can keep the law without love, but as she loves she will find herself inadvertently keeping the law. Willard surmises: “Living in love as Jesus defines it by his words and deeds is the sure way to know Christ in the modern world. On the other hand, if you are not reconciled to living in love as the centre of your life, and actually living that way, any knowledge that you may have of Christ will be shallow and shaky at best.”

When seeking to discern the will of God, it can be certain that God will lead toward that which will help foster a growing expression of love.

*Knowing Christ Today* also invites the reader to consider Willard’s steps for entering “into this interactive relationship of knowing Christ, that is life with him in the kingdom of God.” The first step says Willard is a spirit of humility. The willingness to come to Jesus as a child and turning from an attitude, which says one is capable of managing his own life, to allowing God to be God in his life. There is no negotiating deals with God, just a simple and complete submission to his rule and Reign over one’s life. The second preliminary to entering this interactive life with Jesus, Willard calls

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57 Ibid., 88.
58 Ibid., 93.
59 Ibid., 150.
60 Ibid., 151.
inward rightness: “It is the decision and the settled intention, carried into practice, to become good, ‘righteous,’ on the inside – in the hidden dimension of the self that make up human character – not just in action or outward behaviour.” Willard further explains that entering the Kingdom of God is more than simply entering into heaven upon death; it is the joy of living interactively with the Kingdom of God in life here and now. One of Willard’s key themes for the book is “knowledge is interactive relationship.” It is in this interactive relationship with Jesus where one experiences life in the Kingdom of God.

Knowing Christ Today presents a thorough argument for the place of knowledge in the life of the Christian. Profession and belief must be undergirded by knowledge, leading to an interactive relationship with Jesus and life in the Kingdom of God. The limitation of the book as it relates to the seeking of discernment, lies in the lack of direct references to the way knowledge informs wisdom for decision making. No doubt this connection exists implicitly in Knowing Christ Today but a stronger explicit exposition would have been beneficial.

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61 Ibid., 152.

62 Ibid., 161.
CHAPTER FOUR
THEOLOGY OF THE NEW MINISTRY

The writings of the desert dwellers, Ignatius and Willard, have inspired me to approach my theological reflections, through the framework of Jeremiah 6:16: “This is what the Lord says: ‘Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.’” This verse encapsulates the fundamental steps of a discernment journey. This project attempts to demonstrate how the desert dwellers, Ignatius, Willard and the Scriptures contribute to this theological outline. This chapter will divide the verse into four different components. Each one will explore wisdom drawn from the Scriptures, the desert dwellers, Ignatius and Willard.

This is What the Lord Says

This verse sits within a passage where God is speaking to the Israelites, rebuking them for their disobedience. Here, God offers them advice on how they might return to him and his ways. Discerning the will of God is firstly a matter of soberly assessing a situation and contemplating the ways God may be communicating. Secondly, one
considers the ancient paths of Scripture and the way these sacred texts may be guiding him. Thirdly, he seeks God’s leading for the good and most loving way forward and subsequently makes his decision and acts. Fourthly and finally he waits for a deep peace and confidence that transcends understanding and confirms God’s leading.

**Stand at the Crossroads and Look**

When seeking to make an important decision, the first step in discernment is to slow down and stand at the crossroads, the meeting of ways. Standing represents an intentional decision to stop moving with the inertia of life and enter a time of stillness, a time of solitude and silence where deep reflection can take place. Gallagher writes, “Ignatius prescribes silence as the ideal climate of discernment (SpirEx, 20): silence that allows us to hear the ‘still small voice’ (1 Kings 19:12) in which God speaks to the human heart.” Such times of silence allow opportunity for intentional reflection and a deepening awareness of the inner movements of one’s life. Noticing these inner movements is an important element of discerning God’s leading. David Flemming writes, “Discernment is being able to listen and respond to the language of God, spoken within our hearts and expressed in our affections.”

Standing and looking also offers time to consider the way forward with respect to the rest of one’s life. This time of reflection can lead to what is commonly referred to as sober judgement. The Apostle Peter writes: “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pt 5:8). A

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1 Gallagher, *Discerning the Will of God*, 55.

sober mind indicates a mind free of unhealthy idealisations or infatuations with unrealistic paths. Peter writes that the enemy prowls around seeking to confuse and derail one’s intentions to live her life according to the will of God. Additionally, Paul also suggests: “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you” (Rom 12:3). Paul reminds his readers of the danger of self-deception, which can be a temptation, when self-reflection is avoided: “If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else” (Gal 6:3-4). Testing one’s thoughts, motivations and actions help her enter the discernment journey with greater clarity and sobriety.

This standing and looking phase, is also an ideal time to make an assessment, of one’s priorities. The enemy will seek to distract him with peripheral matters, by giving them more value than they deserve. Discernment begins by considering whether peripheral matters are affecting his decision-making. Abba Poeman’s advice is “Do not give your heart to that which does not satisfy the heart.” Abba Poeman encourages assessing whether he is seeking to gain greater satisfaction or meaning from something, which clearly ought to be peripheral to his life. Paul wisely recommends: “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what

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the Lord’s will is” (Eph 5:15-17). As one stands and considers his decision with sober judgement, as he seeks to reflect wisely and set aside foolish and futile thinking, God will help him gain perspective and understanding into his will for one’s life.

Willard recognizes that one of the hurdles to hearing God, is not living with an expectation to hear him speak. He writes, “The fact that we do not hear, does not mean that God is not speaking.” God is indeed speaking, and this first step of standing and looking encourages slowing down, reflecting and entering a posture of expectancy and readiness to hear. He writes:

The reality of God’s voice does not make seeking for it unnecessary. When I seek for something I look for it everywhere. It is when we seek God earnestly, prepared to go out of our way to examine anything which might be his overture toward us – including the most obvious things, like the Bible or our own thoughts – that he promises to be found (Jeremiah 29:13). But we will be able to seek him only if we honestly believe that he might explicitly address us, in ways suitable to his purpose in our lives.⁵

*Hearing God* explores the various ways in which God has spoken to people in Scripture. The following summary of six alternative approaches, provide a helpful theological foundation for those seeking to listen out for God’s voice:

**Phenomenon Plus Voice.**⁶ This first category is demonstrated in the Old Testament when God spoke to Moses audibly, combined with the phenomenon of the burning bush (Ex 3:3-12). God gave Moses clear direction “I am sending you to Pharaoh to being my people the Israelites out of Egypt” (Ex 3:10).

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⁵ Ibid., 82.

⁶ Ibid., 83.
Supernatural Messenger or Angel. The word angel means messenger. Throughout the Bible God uses these supernatural beings to address human beings at various instances. One memorable example is when an angel appeared at the empty tomb of Jesus, declaring that Christ had risen (Mt 28:2-5).

Dreams and Visions. God is also recorded communicating to his people through dreams and visions. The Apostle Paul one night “had a vision of a man from Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9). Paul having established he had heard from God, immediately left to preach the Gospel in Macedonia.

Audible Voice. Sometimes God chooses to speak to his people using an audible voice. One of the most compelling examples is when God spoke to young Samuel. Eli, Samuel’s mentor, instructed Samuel to respond to God with the words “Speak, for your servant is listening” (1 Sm 3:10). In response, God speaks clearly to Samuel about the coming judgement on Eli’s family (1 Sm 3:11-14).

The Human Voice. God also chooses at times to speak conjointly with human beings. When God sent Moses to speak to Pharaoh, Moses protested saying “Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue” (Ex 4:10). God responded swiftly explaining “I will help you speak and will teach you what to say” (Ex 4:12). Pharaoh subsequently heard from God through the voice of Moses. Paul in the New Testament likewise understood, “My message and

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7 Ibid., 84.
8 Ibid., 85.
9 Ibid., 86.
10 Ibid., 87.
my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power” (1 Cor 2:4). Paul appreciated that his preaching were words empowered and animated by the Spirit of God.

**The Human Spirit or the Still Small Voice.**

God also chooses to speak to one’s own spirits, thoughts and feelings. Paul advises not to be conformed to the ways and pattern of the world, “but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve (discern) what God’s will is, his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom 12:2). As one’s heart and mind are renewed by the Spirit of God, her human spirit is positioned to hear from God through her own convictions. Paul writes that “We have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16), we can expect Christ’s mind to offer wisdom, knowledge and discernment when seeking God’s guidance.

**Ask for the Ancient Paths**

The second phase of the discernment journey leads to enquiring the ancient paths. Christ followers are encouraged to consider the ancient Scriptures and the wisdom held within for discernment. Joseph Benson, in his commentary on Jeremiah 6:16, explains the ancient paths this way: “Inquire in what way the patriarchs, the judges, the kings, and prophets of former times walked, and imitate their practices.”

In this phase one considers how the Bible speaks into the decision before him. The author of Hebrews speaks of the value of Scripture when seeking to enter a time of discernment: “For the

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11 Ibid., 91.

word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even
to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the
heart” (Heb 4:12). It is comforting to know God’s word is not lifeless and redundant, in
fact it is alive and active and able to offer guidance thousands of years after it was written.

The Holy Spirit animates the Scriptures and brings them to life. These ancient
 sacred writings offer wisdom through their capacity to penetrate soul and spirit and
divide and judge thoughts and attitudes, leading to an increased awareness of God’s ways
and will for one’s life. The Apostle Paul adds: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is
useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant
of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tm 3:16-17). It is a relief to
know the ancient Scriptures are not a collection of stories, fables and myths.

Through the Holy Spirit, God ‘breathed’ the Scriptures into being by inspiring his
servants to write them down. Though the authors wrote from their own personal,
historical and cultural contexts, using their minds, language and style, they ultimately
wrote as God inspired them. Readers can gain confidence in the ancient paths of
Scripture for God was in control of its writing. The words are authoritative for the
development of faith, understanding of truth and the formation of one’s life. The Psalmist
also writes of the way God’s Word illuminates one’s path in life. “Your word is a
lamp for my feet, a light on my path” (Ps 119:105).

The Bible holds great wisdom of the ancient paths taken by faithful men and
women of the past. Its wisdom can speak into discernment of God’s will and help
determine the right path to take. Abba Doulas warns that, “Ignorance of the Scriptures is
a precipice and a deep abyss.”

The ancient paths of Scripture are guardrails, preventing a fall into foolish decision. According to the desert dwellers, it is more than just knowing Scripture that will give wisdom. Harmless writes: “For Antony and the desert fathers, knowledge of texts was not knowledge. Genuine knowledge of Scripture was lived knowledge, making one’s own the values and way of life that the Scriptures called for.”

Ancient Christians sought out the desert dwellers for their wisdom. It was not a wisdom borne from just knowing, understanding and interpreting Scripture. It was a knowledge formed in the crucible of obedience. The desert mothers and fathers sought to integrate the Scriptures into everyday life. These ancient sacred paths formed their values, attitudes, practices and habits. It was the wisdom, which flowed from this lived knowledge of Scripture, which these ancient brothers and sisters trekked through the deserts to receive.

Willard suggests the Bible was never designed to give answers to every possible situation in life. God instead designed the Bible to give principles to live by, principles which have guided Christ-followers for thousands of years. He writes: “Our reverence for and faith in the Bible must not be allowed to blind us to the need for personal divine guidance within the principles of the Bible, but beyond the details of what it explicitly says.”

An important key to discernment is to read the Bible and draw from it the

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13 Ward, Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 58.

14 Harmless, Desert Christians, 246.

15 Willard, Hearing God, 47.
timeless principles spanning the centuries of the Old and New Testament. These principles offer a needed spiritual compass pointing toward God’s ways.

The discernment journey will require familiarity with the ancient paths of biblical principles. The more acquainted one is with biblical teaching, the more helpful it will be to discern God’s leading. Willard says that God’s voice will always conform with biblical principles: “In order to qualify for the voice of God, a thought, perception or other experience must conform to the principles—the fundamental truths—of Scripture. It is the principles, not the incidentals, of Scripture that count here.”

Whilst seeking God’s guidance, it is comforting to know his voice will never contradict the ancient paths of Scripture. Willard explains, “No specific word that is from God will ever contradict such (biblical) principles. Such principles place an iron-clad restriction on what content can come with God’s voice.” Spending hours studying and understanding the Bible is a valuable investment of time. Such study will help one become familiar with God’s principles, so she can discern his leadings.

Although Ignatius recognizes that God speaks in numerous ways, he nevertheless encourages valuing the ancient paths of Scripture, for through them, God speaks and guides. Ignatian author David Flemming writes, “Ignatian spirituality sees God as a ‘media God.’ God is ever-present, constantly in touch, communicating with us in many ways: in prayer and reading Scripture, of course, but also through the events of our

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16 Ibid., 172.
17 Ibid., 173.
lives.” The Ignatian exercises, recognized for their value in discernment, are built around a regular practice of meditating on the Gospel narratives. Scripture is highly respected as the means by which one meets Jesus and receives from him wisdom and discernment for life. Flemming continues, “Ignatius would have us carefully enter into a contemplative way of knowing Jesus in the Gospels. We become like Jesus’ disciples—following him, listening to him, seeking to understand him, responding to his call. Quiet reflection, patient noticing – this is how we hear the media God who is ever-present.”

Ignatius, through his Spiritual Exercises, developed a way of helping engage with Scripture with the use of one’s imagination. Ignatius believed that one of the ways God speaks through the ancient texts is by immersing oneself in the passage of Scripture, particularly the Gospels. David Flemming writes: “Imaginative prayer makes the Jesus of the gospels our Jesus. It helps us develop a unique and personal relationship with him. We watch Jesus’ face. We listen to the way he speaks. We notice how people respond to him. These imaginative details bring us to know Jesus as more than a name or a historical figure in a book. He is a living person.” As one walks with the living person of Jesus, through the ancient paths of Scripture, he will more easily be able to lead and guide her according to his will for her life.

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18 David Flemming, *What is Ignatian Spirituality?* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 44.

19 Ibid., 47.

20 Ibid., 58.
Ask Where the Good Way is, and Walk in It

The next phase of the discernment journey, focuses on seeking out the good way of God’s will. Jesus’ brother James writes that, “If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you” (Jas 1:5). Scripture invites one to ask God for his wisdom when in need. There is no greater time for a deposit of wisdom, than when seeking to discern the will of God. His will can also be referred to as the good way. Paul, in the New Testament book of Romans, writes, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom 12:2). God’s will, is always bathed in goodness. Forty-three times in the Bible are these words: “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever” (Ps 118:29). Paul writes: “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good” (Rom 12:9). Both in the Old and New Testaments, goodness and love are intertwined. Seeking God’s will is to seek the good way and the good way is akin to seeking the most loving way.

In his book Knowing Christ Today, Willard asks four important questions: “What is reality? Who is well-off or blessed? Who is a truly good person? How does one become a truly good person?”21 His conclusion to the identity of a good person helps in understanding the importance of this question for the discernment journey. A good person, according to Willard, “Is anyone who is pervaded with love: Love for the God who ‘first loved us’ and who in his Son taught us what love is. (1 John 4:19-11) And then

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21 Willard, Knowing Christ Today, 54.
out of the abundance of such a kingdom life, we bring love to all with whom we have meaningful contact, our neighbours.” According to Willard, the good way is a way marked by love.

Ignatius came to experience God as love, in fact he is more than love: “We might better say God is Love loving.” For Ignatius, discernment is led by love. Lonsdale writes:

Very briefly Ignatian discernment is the art of appreciating the gifts that God has given us and discovering how we might best respond to that love in daily life. It is a process of finding one’s own way of discipleship in a particular set of circumstances; a means of responding to the call of Christian love and truth in a situation where there are often conflicting interests and values and choices have to be made. It is the gift by which we are able to observe and assess the different factors in a particular situation, and to choose that course of actions which most authentically answers our desire to live by the gospel.

Understanding the direction a decision takes a person will help the discernment journey. George Traub notes: “Discernment has to do more with the spiritual interpretation and evaluation of feelings, and particularly with the direction in which we are moved by them.” In discernment, God mostly leads toward inner movements of life and love. This is seen in Jesus: “Discernment for Jesus was whatever in him and in his mission—his work—led to life and to love, not to death and enmity.” Ignatius offers some very practical suggestions for those times when people are finding it difficult to discern the

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22 Ibid., 53.
23 Flemming, What is Ignatian Spirituality? 82.
26 Ibid., 69.
good way of God’s will. His suggestions include using one’s imagination. Ignatius believes that imagination can play a helpful part in discernment. He suggests, “Living with each choice for a set period of time, and seeing which choice gives you a greater sense of peace.” Ignatius encourages use of imagination by spending a few days acting as if the choice has been made, then switching to the opposite choice for another few days. This exercise helps one become aware of how both outcomes impact emotions. If one decision leads to increased agitation and another to a greater sense of peace, then God may have given the answer one is seeking. Using imagination in this way helps one to see the consequences of a decision before making it.

Another imaginative way Ignatius recommends for seeking discerning God’s will includes giving advice. Ignatius suggests one “imagine a person whom I have never seen or known and imagine what advice you would give to this person regarding the same decision you are facing.” In addition, Ignatius invites one to imagine being at the point of death. It can be sobering to imagine oneself on her deathbed and consider a decision to be made. This imaginative practice helps one overcome the temptation to choose an expedient solution. Ignatius invites also invites people to imagine themselves at the last judgment and consider which choice they would want to present before God. And finally, he instructs people to imagine what the best version of themselves would choose. One’s best self is an image of the person he would like to be, the person he believes God is calling him to become. Ignatius invites using imagination to consider what decision the

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28 Ibid., 323.
best self would make. James Martin writes: “Making decisions as if you were your best self, will help you become your best self.”

Ignatius also encourages the use of reason, giving six steps. The first step is to present the choice before God in prayer. The second is to identify the ultimate objective, which for Ignatius is the desire to please God. Next is to ask God to move one’s heart toward one choice over another. Fourth is making two lists, writing out the positives and the negatives for each option. The fifth step is to seek peace by presenting the lists to God in prayer and seeing which option provides the greatest sense of peace. The final step is to seek some type of confirmation from God. When discerning the good way of God’s will, Ignatius encourages the use of imagination and reason to draw one toward making a good and loving decision. God’s desires for his people are to make good, loving, healthy, positive, life-giving choices.

Once one has discerned God’s good way for life, there comes a time when she needs to decide and walk in it. Walking is a decision to act; it takes intentionality and movement. The discernment process will fail if one does not act on the discernment received. Walking in discernment is choosing to undertake a course of action as a result of discerning the will of God. Sometimes through fear, one can be tempted to resist acting on discernment received. She can find herself beleaguered by fears such as: fear of change, fear of the unknown, fear of leaving the familiar, or fear of making a mistake. Fears can plague good intentions to pursue the will of God. Fear can be debilitating. God

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29 Ibid., 326.

30 Ibid., 317-318.
encourages through the Scriptures to not give in to fear. In preparing the disciples for his departure, Jesus said: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your heart be troubled and do not be afraid” (Jn 14:27). In the Old Testament, God encouraged Joshua in his leadership of the nation of Israel with the words: “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” (Jos 1:9).

One enters a discernment process with the hope that at some point discernment will be reached. Once a clear conviction has been gained, Jeremiah’s encouragement is to simply walk in it. Some decisions will lead to walking into the unknown; this takes courage. Yet, Christ’s followers walk in trust and faith, for they know they have gained direction from the living God. Thomas Kelly captures walking in simple trust beautifully in his book Testament of Devotion: “But there is a deeper, an internal simplification of the whole of one’s personality, stilled, tranquil, in childlike trust listening ever to Eternity’s whisper, walking with a smile into the dark.”

And you will Find Rest for your Souls

The consequence of having discerned the will of God is the ability to move forward with hope and confidence, combined with a deep experience of rest and peace. Paul writes: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Rom 15:13) The desert dwellers, Ignatius and Willard agree that the manifestation of rest and peace are natural by-products of trusting that one has discerned the will of God correctly. Lonsdale

writes: “Once the decision has been made Ignatius expects that we will experience confirmation of the rightness of our choice and that this confirmation will come through experiences of consolation. This will assure us that the decision we have reached is coherent with and a concrete expression of our commitment to being disciples of Jesus.”  

During the discernment process, Ignatius encourages noting which outcome provides the greater sense of consolation: which way is one’s spirit drawn more toward? Ignatius paid great attention to these inner movements and often discerned the will of God accordingly. His biography states: “From experience he (Ignatius) knew that some thoughts left him sad while others made him happy, and little by little he came to perceive the different spirits that were moving him; one coming from the devil, the other coming from God.”

Ignatian discernment pays great attention to these inner movements and languages of the heart. Ignatius takes seriously one’s affectivity and the way God meets him in his experience. Ignatius believed he could trust his experiences of spiritual consolation and desolation for the purpose of guidance. Gallagher writes:

Ignatius’s sensitive and ongoing attention to his interior spiritual experience throughout the day results in the ability to identify clearly what in his experience is of God and what is not. This clarity in turn enhances his capacity to choose and to act in the day with spiritual wisdom. Ignatius’s attentive and discerning review of his spiritual experience leads him to spiritual freedom: freedom from deception and freedom to say “yes” this day, with all the unified energy of his being, to the

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God he loves.\textsuperscript{34} Ignatius understands the important role consolation and desolation play in the discernment journey. One’s experience of consolation provides the confidence, joy and peace needed to confirm that God’s will has been discerned correctly.

This gift of consolation and peace within one’s heart is a comforting outcome of the discernment process, a feeling she should be attentive to and thankful for. Trevor Hudson, an author greatly influenced by Ignatius, writes: “Paul encourages the Colossian Christ-followers to allow the peace of Christ to guide them in their decisions (See Colossians 3:15). To put it plainly, when God leads and guides us, we experience a profound sense of peace about the decision we are making.”\textsuperscript{35}

Willard, in his writings, invites readers to explore life in the Kingdom of God. Such a life is lived interactively with Jesus, where daily communion and conversation occurs. This intimacy of relationship leads to a capacity to discern his will moment-by-moment, day-by-day. The upshot is a life marked by deep trust and confidence; hope and joy; peace and rest. Willard writes, “As Jesus so clearly lived and taught, the life of the kingdom ‘is rightness, peace and joy inspired by the Holy Spirit.’”\textsuperscript{36} Willard recognises that, “The voice of God speaking in our souls also bears within itself a characteristic spirit. It is a spirit of exalted peacefulness and confidence, of joy, of sweet reasonableness,


\textsuperscript{36} Willard, \textit{Hearing God}, 106.
Recognising the characteristic nature of God’s voice helps one experience confirmation from God, as he seeks to discern his will. Peace, says Willard, will always be an important feature of God’s leading. The Apostle Paul encourages readers to seek out God’s peace: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your heart” (Col 3:15a). Living interactively with Jesus in God’s Kingdom, according to the discerned will of God, will go a long way to seeing Christ’s peace rule in one’s heart and the ensuing deep rest for his soul.

The desert dwellers understood that one of the ways one discerns God’s voice, as opposed to other voices, is by noticing how it presents with a manifestation of peace and joy, tranquillity and courage. Harmless writes:

The monk needed to know if a voice or a vision was from God or from demons. In his speech Antony set out principles for making such a discernment. Evil spirits, he noted, are noisy – crashing, shouting, creating the “sort of disturbance one might expect from tough youths and robbers.” The best measure was the emotions that a voice or a vision stirred up in a monk’s soul. Demons inspired only negative effects: “terror, confusion and disorder of thoughts, dejection, enmity toward ascetics, listlessness, grief, memory of relatives, fear of death.” Angelic spirits, by contrast, stirred up very different emotions: tranquillity, joy, delight, courage, peacefulness.

Peace is understood to be the expected consequence of discerning well and hearing God correctly. The Psalmist adds “I will listen to what God the Lord says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants—but let them not turn to folly” (Ps 85:8).

Faithfully pursuing God’s wisdom, will lead toward making a good decision according to the will of God, with the benefit of receiving what God promises, peace.

37 Ibid., 171.

38 Harmless, Desert Christians, 87.
Willard adds a helpful nuance to understanding the nature of God’s peace. He writes: “Peace is the rest of will that results from assurance about ‘how things will turn out.’ It is always a form of active engagement with good, plus assurance that things will turn out well.” Ultimately peace is related to a deep confidence in God, that indeed he is leading one in a direction where things will turn out well.

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PART THREE

MINISTRY PRACTICE
CHAPTER FIVE

PLAN FOR THE SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT RETREAT

The aim of this project is to assist people with discerning the will of God, when standing at the crossroads of a major decision in life. Confidence for discernment is gained through the guidance offered by the Scriptures and by knowing that God is interested in one’s life and desires to guide his people. Assurance is further strengthened by noting the consistent themes and principles discovered for successful discernment by the desert dwellers of the third and fourth centuries, Ignatius in the sixteenth century and Willard in the twenty-first century. The Spiritual Discernment Retreat will span across a three-week journey with rhythms for discernment being established two weeks prior to the weekend retreat and a week of confirmation following the retreat. During the retreat, participants will be encouraged to reflect on a variety of carefully crafted questions and journal their responses. Following the retreat, a week of confirmation will help participants receive the validation required to take the next step. A celebration evening will be held at the end of the discernment journey, where an assessment will also be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the Spiritual Discernment Retreat.
Theological Implications

Exploring what Scripture says about guidance shows that Christians worship a God who actually desires to lead, guide and point his followers in the right direction. In the Old Testament, God promises Isaiah the prophet that if one seeks to live a life in keeping with Kingdom values, he will guide him: “If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame’ (Is 58:9b-11a). In the book of Proverbs, God promises to offer wise counsel: “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you” (Pv 32:8). God promises to reveal his words of guidance to his people.

Once again, Isaiah reminds his readers “Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying: ‘This is the way; walk in it’” (Is 30:20-21). Knowing that one is loved by a God who is actively walking behind her, steadying her steps and whispering directions gives her great comfort. As the Psalmist says, “The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand” (Ps 37:23-24).

As one submits aspirations and plans in life to God’s will, he promises to guide one step at a time: “In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps” (Pv 16:9). One can be comforted in knowing that as he submits his way to God and places his trust in him, God will lead him along the best path, in accordance with his will.
The author of Proverbs again writes: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight” (Pv 3:5-6). The Psalmist also reminds that God guides the humble, those who seek to live to please him: “Good and upright is the Lord; Therefore, he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful toward those who keep the demands of his covenant” (Ps 25:8-10).

In the New Testament, Jesus explained that his Father would send the Holy Spirit: “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (Jn 14:26). Not only will the Holy Spirit teach God’s ways and remind of everything Jesus taught, he will also be the counsellor. John writes, “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come” (Jn 16:13). People are blessed to receive guidance from the Spirit of God, their personal counsellor, who leads according to God’s truth.

Christ’s followers worship a God who desires to walk close beside them. God makes it possible and achievable to discern his will, simply by positioning oneself in a close and intimate relationship with him. The Psalmist declares: “Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory” (Ps 73:23-24). The ability to discern the will of God begins by choosing to walk through life hand-in-hand with God. Jesus in the New Testament describes this closeness of relationship by using a metaphor of a shepherd and his sheep.
Jesus notes that the relationship is so intimate that the shepherd calls his sheep by name. The sheep know the shepherd so well that they easily recognise his voice: “The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (Jn 10:2-3). In such a relationship, it is easy to understand how discerning God’s will becomes a natural and conventional way of going about life and decision making. The apostle John, in his Gospel, records Jesus inviting people to walk in the light of life: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12).

James the brother of Jesus, enjoyed growing up side-by-side with Jesus. It is probable that James regularly asked Jesus for advice. James writes: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him” (Jas 1:5). Discerning and discovering God’s will for one’s life is possible because God desires to offer her personal guidance as a father does a child, as a shepherd does his sheep. There is much people can do to position themselves to hear God’s voice and discern his will. They can choose to walk closely with God, seek to live according to Kingdom values, submit their ways to him, place their trust in him, listen for his voice and regularly ask him for wisdom.

Goals

Sometimes individuals are left with the task of determining an important and life-shaping decision on their own. On occasion one might have a spouse, close friends or family with whom to deliberate the pros and cons for such a decision. Though seeking
advice from trusted friends and family is helpful, there are additional insights and practices one can engage with to further clarify the will of God.

The discernment process outlined in this project seeks to teach participants timeless principles and practices for discerning God’s will. These principles are initiated by God in Scripture and reaffirmed and developed through the writings of the desert dwellers, Ignatius and Willard. By combining teaching on discernment principles, with tried and proven spiritual practices, participants will hopefully experience a helpful and effective journey of discernment. The goal is to also see participants adopting these principles and practices, leading to greater general discernment in life.

Finally, the goal for the discernment journey outlined in this project is for individuals to gain the confidence to make a faithful decision in accordance with God’s leading. This confidence, borne from a three-week journey of learning and practicing discernment principles, will ideally have culminated with receiving the peace required to make a decision. The certainty of having discerned God’s will, also provides the courage needed to face the consequences, no matter how daunting the outcome of the decision may seem.

**Format**

The Spiritual Discernment Retreat sits within the format of a three-week journey. The truth is, discerning the will of God often takes time. For example, Ignatius established *The Spiritual Exercises* as a one-month long silent retreat for the purpose of discernment. Though it is possible to receive conviction for an important decision over a weekend, it seems prudent to take a minimum of two weeks in preparation for the retreat,
to establish important and helpful listening practices. During this time, themes may become evident and awareness of God’s leading can begin to occur. A weekend retreat, with its heightened experience of intimacy with one another and with God, may not be the most appropriate context for making a final decision. The week following the retreat allows for sobriety, which settles, when entering the rhythm of normal life. This post-retreat week allows God time to provide the peace of his confirmation.

The introduction and preparation evening launches the three-week discernment journey. Firstly, this evening is designed to assist participants clarify the decision being sought. Clarity with regards to the question being presented for discernment is crucial. A vague question may only result in a vague response. A clear, succinct question has the possibility to lead to a clear and distinct answer. The introductory evening is also designed to provide a complete outline for the upcoming discernment process. In preparation for the three-week journey, teaching will also be given on the daily spiritual practices of lectio divina and examen. These practices will start and end each day of the discernment journey. Participants will also gain an understanding of Ignatius’ teaching on indifference, which is vitally important before initiating the discernment journey. Teaching on consolation and desolation will also be explored, which is helpful for noticing the movements of God in one’s life.

The two weeks leading up to the retreat are designed to prepare the participant by deepening their prayer life through the daily practices of lectio divina and examen. These ancient spiritual prayer practices are designed to help the individual begin recognising the nuances of God’s voice. A rhythm of two weeks also allows time for the participant to
gain awareness of God’s movements within, which is beneficial for the discernment process. *Lectio divina* gives God an opportunity to begin whispering convictions through the Scriptures and the *Examen* helps the participant to review the day, looking for and noticing God’s movements through feelings of consolation and desolation. Participants will also be encouraged to keep a journal handy to begin recording their thoughts, insights, emotions and convictions.

The weekend retreat is designed as a dedicated period of discernment. Numerous practices will be explored, including: solitude and silence, meditating and journaling on a series of key reflective questions and teaching on hearing God. Participants will also learn about the ministry of spiritual direction and the role it plays in discernment. Each participant will be offered one session of spiritual direction. The weekend retreat provides an opportunity for participants to slow down, contemplate, pray, meditate and enter a posture conducive to hearing the voice of God. These practices are fundamentally important to the discernment process. Solitude helps one set his work aside so he can be attentive to God. In silence, he steps aside from human relationships to be attentive to God. The reflective questions developed for the retreat are based on scriptural principles and the teachings of the desert dwellers, Ignatius and Willard. Each of these authors provide valuable wisdom for the one seeking to discern the will of God. Teaching on hearing God’s voice will also assist the participant to notice the nuances of God’s promptings and leadings.

The week following the retreat is designed to give the one seeking discernment an opportunity to gain confirmation from God, with regards to the decision being made.
During this post-retreat week, participants will be encouraged to keep practicing *lectio divina* in the mornings and the *examen* in the evenings and to maintain their journal reflections. If God has begun to reveal his will, then this week is an opportunity to allow God to affirm and settle the decision in the heart of the participant. The desert dwellers, Ignatius and Willard all agree that the gift of God’s peace is commonly associated with the confirmation of God’s will. This closing week is an opportunity to gain the assurance needed by receiving the deposit of God’s peace.

At the end of the third week, the final celebration evening is designed for retreat participants to come together and share their discernment journey. Some participants may have arrived at a point of discernment; others may not. This evening provides an opportunity to reflect on the journey so far. Of particular interest will be the sharing of what was most helpful and what was least helpful for discerning God’s will. The evening will be a celebration for those who have come to a decision and for those who will continue the discernment journey beyond the allocated three-week time frame.

**Content**

Green defines discernment as “the art of finding God’s will in the concrete life situations, which confront us.”¹ Any artist requires the appropriate tools to create an artwork. Items such as paints, brushes, a palette and canvas are amongst the most fundamental tools needed. Similarly, becoming an artist of discernment requires certain tools. This section will seek to unpack the content presented to retreat participants on the

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¹ Green, *Weeds Among the Wheat*, 57.
preparation evening and during the discernment retreat. These tools come in the form of spiritual practices, teaching and reflection questions.

Teaching on Indifference

To begin a discernment journey, it is helpful to posture oneself with indifference. When the term indifference is used by Ignatius and other writers, it does not infer a lack of care or personal interest with regards to an outcome. Nor is it a lack of desire or longing for a decision to be made. Instead, indifference is freeing oneself from desires and biases, so she can be positioned to say yes to God’s leading, no matter what it might be. Larry Warner writes, “Indifference is about freedom to be and to live in a way that honours and affirms who God created you to be.”2 He continues, “A helpful way to think about indifference is that it involves a two-fold freedom: freedom from those things that would hold you back from saying yes to God (disordered attachments) and a freedom to say a more robust and resounding yes to God.”3

Ignatius invites the retreatant to contemplate “The Principle and Foundation:”

Human Beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of doing this to save our souls. The other things on the face of the earth are created for the human beings, to help them in the pursuit of the end for which they are created. From this it follows that we ought to use these things to the extent that they help us toward our end and free ourselves from them to the extent that they hinder us from it. To attain this, it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things, in regard to everything which is left to our free will and is not forbidden. Consequently, on our own part we ought not to seek health rather than sickness, wealth rather than poverty, honour rather than dishonour, a long life rather than a short one, and so in all other matters. Rather, we ought to desire

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2 Larry Warner, Discovering the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius (Abingdon, UK: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2011), 83.

3 Ibid., 84.
and choose only that which is more conducive to the end for which we are created.⁴

Indifference is central to Ignatian discernment. Starting the discernment journey with a posture of indifference means honestly preparing to receive from God whatever direction he chooses to give. Indifference invites approaching the discernment of God’s will without a pre-determined outcome or bias toward one answer over another. Kevin O’Brien further explains Ignatius’ meaning of the word indifference: “Indifference means that we hold all of God’s gifts reverently, gratefully, but also lightly, embracing them or letting them go, all depending on how they help us fulfil our vocation to love in everyday, concrete details.”⁵ Margaret Silf offers an alternative word for indifference, the word detachment.⁶ One allows her soul to detach itself from her agenda. This is true freedom; it is a stance of complete openness to God. Embracing this stance of indifference and detachment, prepares her to begin the discernment journey with honesty and openness, with freedom and flexibility. Adopting a posture of indifference states a willingness to be led by God on a journey toward the unfolding of his will for her life.

Teaching on Consolation and Desolation

Ignatius gained unique insights into the way God leads through spiritual consolation and desolation. One becomes aware of one or the other by paying attention to the inner movements of his life. These movements either draw him toward God, or away

⁵ Ibid., 63.
from God. This teaching is also called the discernment of spirits. Spiritual consolation will generally lead to greater movements of faith, hope and love. Spiritual desolation will lead away from faith, hope and love.

During the discernment process, Ignatius encourages noting which outcome provides the greater sense of consolation, which one’s spirit is drawn more toward. Ignatius paid great attention to these inner movements and often discerned the will of God accordingly. His bibliography notes: “From experience he (Ignatius) knew that some thoughts left him sad while others made him happy, and little by little he came to perceive the different spirits that were moving him; one coming from the devil, the other coming from God.”

Ignatian discernment pays great attention to these inner movements and languages of the heart. Ignatius takes seriously affectivity and the way God meets one in her experience. Ignatius believed she is able to trust her experiences of spiritual consolation and desolation for the purpose of guidance. Gallagher notes:

Ignatius is attentive to distinguish the spiritual consolations and spiritual desolations he experiences as his busy day unfolds: in prayer, in preparing for Mass, during Mass, in his place of work, and during a meal. He notices the thoughts that arise from these consolations and desolations, whether the grace-inspired insight that accompanies spiritual consolation or the confusing thoughts born of spiritual desolation. He is careful to discern which thoughts are of God and which are of the enemy, and so to accept those that are of God and reject those that are of the enemy. Ignatius strives to understand the spiritual desires of his own heart and to discern whether these are in accord with God’s desire or not.

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When he recognizes that his desire is not in harmony with God’s, Ignatius actively seeks to conform his desire to God’s desire.\(^8\)

Spiritual consolation is a helpful sign of God’s presence and activity. Noticing spiritual consolation will require observation and awareness. Ignatius defines consolation this way: “I call consolation every increase of hope, faith and charity, and all interior joy that calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one’s soul, quieting it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord.”\(^9\) Ignatius speaks of spiritual consolation as those interior movements of the heart that lead to feeling uplifted with hope, faith, joy and peace. James Martin describes the nuances of consolation this way: “Consolation, is the sense of God’s presence and those interior feelings that lead to peace, tranquillity and joy . . . consolation is a sense of peace and of rightness of the choice. Consolation leads you to feel encouraged, confident, and calm in your decision.”

Ignatius understood that God works through one’s deepest desires. When one is following God’s will, things will seem right, things feel in sync because they are in sync. Consolation though, is more than just feeling that a certain direction is right; Ignatius recognises that God’s will draws people more deeply toward God and toward love. Lonsdale explains: “Consolation is any affective movement or state that draws us to God or that helps us to be less centred upon ourselves and to open out to others in generosity, service and love.”\(^10\) God’s will, often leads to decisions that create the environment for one to magnify his expression of love. Lonsdale’s explanation of consolation continues:

\(^{8}\) Gallagher, *The Examen Prayer*, 78.

\(^{9}\) Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 48.

\(^{10}\) Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear*, 98.
“The main direction is towards growth, creativity and a genuine fullness of life and love. . . a fuller, effective, generous love of God and other people, and to a right love of ourselves.”¹¹

Spiritual desolation are those inner movements which help people discern if they are moving away from a good decision based on God’s will. Ignatius states: “I call desolation all the contrary to the third rule (consolation), such as darkness of soul, disturbance in it, movement to low and earthly things, disquiet from various agitations and temptations, moving to lack of confidence, without hope, without love, finding oneself totally slothful, tepid, sad, and, as if separated from one’s Creator and Lord.”¹²

When considering desolation, one could largely take the qualities of consolation and state its contrary. If consolation focuses on feelings of peace and joy, desolation focuses on feelings of disquiet and sadness. Green views the absence of peace as a hallmark of desolation: “The common note of all forms of desolation, I believe, is the loss of peace. Whether the feelings be stormy or simply ‘blah,’ the absence of peace will mark desolation just as surely as the experience of peace marks consolation.”¹³

As one considers his journey of discernment, being awake to feelings of desolation will help him determine whether God may be leading one way or another. Silf, further clarifies the nature of desolation as feelings which, “Turn in on ourselves. Drives us down the spiral ever deeper into our own negative feelings. Cuts us off from

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Gallagher, The Discernment of Spirits, 60.

¹³ Green, Weeds Among the Wheat, 99.
community. Makes us want to give up on the things that used to be important to us. Drains us of energy.”\textsuperscript{14} Feelings of desolation leave him feeling empty and exhausted. God uses desolation to gently prod him away from making the wrong decision. Martin writes: “By desolation Ignatius means anything that moves you toward hopelessness. You are agitated or restless or, as Ignatius says, ‘listless, tepid, and unhappy.’ These feelings mean you are moving away from a good decision.”\textsuperscript{15}

Ignatian discernment with its consolation and desolation, means trusting that God will speak through these spiritual experiences about the choices one is contemplating. One of the ways to determine the difference between consolation and desolation is whether one is feeling drawn or driven toward a decision. Silf writes: “Another useful test to apply to our moods is this: in a particular situation, am I feeling drawn, powerfully maybe, but always gently, or am I feeling driven?”\textsuperscript{16} Consolation could be viewed as the feeling of being drawn toward a decision. Conversely, desolation could be understood as the feeling of being driven toward a decision. This is particularly true if one senses she is being driven toward a decision she is inwardly uncomfortable with. Silf adds: “The action of God on our lives is always, at its heart, experienced as a drawing. If we are feeling driven, then the promptings that gives rise to it is not from God, but from the force-fields

\textsuperscript{14} Silf, \textit{Landmarks}, 88.

\textsuperscript{15} Martin, \textit{The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything}, 316.

\textsuperscript{16} Silf, \textit{Landmarks}, 88.
of our own (or other people’s) kingdom.”¹⁷ Feelings of consolation and desolation therefore play an important part in the discernment journey.

**Teaching on Lectio Divina**

*Lectio divina* is a Latin term which means “divine reading” and describes a way of reading the Scriptures whereby one gradually lets go of his own agenda and opens himself to what God wants to say. Martin explains: “*Lectio divina . . .* uses Scripture to draw you into a deeper relationship with God. *Lectio* relies on both the imagination and the intellect.”¹⁸ *Lectio divina* takes its inspiration from passages such as Proverbs 4:4: “Take hold of my words, with all your heart.” In the twelfth century, a medieval French Carthusian monk called Guigo II wrote a short book called: *The Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations*. At the beginning of the book, Guigo describes the practice of *lectio divina* in simple terms: “One day when I was busy working with my hands I began to think about our spiritual work, and all at once four stages in spiritual exercise came into my mind: reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation.”¹⁹ Guigo used the Latin terms for these four stages of prayer and these are still used today: *lectio, meditatio, oratio and contemplatio*.

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¹⁷ Ibid.


Significantly, “Lectio divina is the practice of encountering God through Scripture.” Though there is a place for studying the Word of God academically through exegesis, lectio divina seeks to interact with the Word by personally encountering Christ in the Scriptures. Chris Webb, explains beautifully the difference between approaching the Scripture as a theorist or as a lover:

The theorist aims for mastery of the text. But the mastery is elusive. There is always more to study, always more to learn. . . . There is however, another way: the way of the lover. A lover does not seek to master the Bible but rather to be seduced by it. True lovers do not despise academic study of Scripture; after all who would not want to discover secrets that help them know their beloved more intimately? No, good scholarship is precious to the lover. But for the lover, study can never be an end in itself; rather than rejecting study, a lover seeks to go beyond it. When we read the Bible as lovers, we are not aiming simply to understand Scripture, to interpret it, to draw from it a coherent framework of teachings and truths that help make God, life and creation comprehensible. We don’t come primarily seeking moral and ethical principles, theological insights, or even practical life application. We come to be kissed by Christ.

Lectio divina is approaching the Scriptures as a lover, savouring the Word, seeking to experience a profound encounter with Jesus himself through the Scriptures. A good way to approach Scripture with lectio divina is to ask: “What does this passage say to my head, heart and hands?” Regarding lectio divina, Chris Webb writes: “We absorb the text as best we can, directing all the power of our senses toward it . . . we also make use of the imagination to allow Scripture to come alive, to speak as fully and presently as possible to us.”

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22 Ibid., 147.
her own transformation. She writes, “*Lectio divina* is rooted in the belief that through the
presence of the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures are indeed alive and active as we engage them
for spiritual transformation (Hebrews 4:12).” An appropriate prayer for beginning *lectio
divina* is the words of Samuel: “Speak Lord your servant is listening” (1 Sm 3:10). Those
engaging with the discernment journey outlined in this project will be encouraged to
practice *lectio divina* each morning for the three week journey. The four movements or
stages of *lectio divina* are as follows.

The first stage is *lectio*, where one reads the Word of God, slowly and reflectively
so it sinks into him. Guigo explains, *lectio divina* itself is “the careful study of the
Scriptures, concentrating all one’s power on it ... it provides the subject matter we must
use for meditation.” Any passage of Scripture can be used for this way of praying, but
the passage should not be too long. It makes no difference which text is chosen, as long
as one has no set goal of covering a certain amount of text. When practicing *lectio*, it is
helpful to place oneself in a comfortable position, allowing himself to become silent.
When turning to the text, he reads it slowly, gently. Haley-Barton suggests, “*Lectio*
involves a slower, more reflective reading of Scripture that helps us to be open to God’s
initiative rather than being subject to human agendas – our own or someone else’s.”

The idea is to savour each portion of the reading, constantly listening for the still, small
voice of a word or phrase that catches one’s attention. He ought not to expect lightning or

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ecstasies. In *lectio divina*, God is teaching his people to listen to him, to seek him in silence. He does not reach out and grab them; rather, he gently invites them ever more deeply into his presence. Richard Foster explains *lectio* as “listening to the text of Scripture - really listening: listening yielded and still. It means submitting to the text of Scripture; allowing its message to flow into us rather than our attempting to master it.”

When reading the Scriptures like a lover, one does not seek to master it, instead, she seeks to meet Jesus between the lines.

The second stage is *meditatio*, where one thinks about the text she has chosen and ruminates upon it. She seeks to take from it, what God wants to give her. *Meditatio*, writes Guigo, is “The busy application of the mind to seek with the help of one’s own reason for knowledge of hidden truth.” The idea is to read the Scripture at least three times, taking note of the word or phrase the Holy Spirit is highlighting. Jan Johnson writes, “We listen even after the reading is over, to sense what words resonate in our ears or shimmer in our memory.” Once she recognises which word is “shimmering,” she goes over the word numerous times, slowly repeating it to herself, allowing it to interact with her inner world of concerns, thoughts and ideas. Marjorie Thompson, describing *meditatio* writes: “Meditation engages us at the level of the ‘heart’ in its Biblical sense,

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27 Guigi II, *The Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations*, 68.

where memory, experience, thoughts, feelings, hopes, desires, and intuitions are joined.”

The third stage is *oratio*, where one lets his heart speak to God. *Oratio*, writes Thompson, “Means the prayer that naturally flows out of our meditation.”\(^{30}\) This response is inspired by reflection on the Word of God. Johnson writes, “*Lectio Divina* is a dialogue: God speaks to us; we respond to God.”\(^{31}\) In *oratio* he interacts with God as he would with one who knows, loves and accepts him. The nature of this prayer, writes Guigo, is quite specific: “Prayer is the hearts devoted turning to God to drive away evil and obtain what is good.”\(^{32}\) In *oratio* one gives to God the good that he has discovered during his reflection on Scripture. Thompson adds: “*Oratio* is the direct cry of the heart to God that rises when we have heard ourselves personally addressed through the Word.”\(^{33}\) During the prayer of *oratio* one invites God to journey with him as he seeks to integrate the shimmering Word into his life.

The final stage of *lectio divina* is *contemplatio*, where people let go not only of their own ideas, plans and meditations but also of their own words and thoughts: “Instead of actively pondering, contemplation involves waiting on God in silence.”\(^{34}\) People


\(^{30}\) Ibid., 26.

\(^{31}\) Johnson, *Savoring God’s Word*, 89.

\(^{32}\) Guigi II, *The Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations*, 68.

\(^{33}\) Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 26.

\(^{34}\) Johnson, *Savoring God’s Word*, 90.
simply rest in the Word of God. They listen at the deepest level of their beings to God, who speaks within with a still small voice. Guigo writes, “Contemplation is when the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and held above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness.”  

35 Contemplatio is a time of complete rest in God’s presence. The idea of contemplatio comes from the beautiful image seen in the Psalms of a weaned child: “But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content” (Ps 131:2). A weaned child, dizzy with contentment and at peace in the security and reassurance of their mother’s arms, what a profound picture for this final stage of contemplatio. Thompson writes: “Contemplation is essentially rest, play, Sabbath-time in God’s presence. . . . Here there are no expectations, no demands, no need to know, no desire but to be in the divine presence, receptive to whatever God desires to do with us.”  

Lectio divina is an important part of any discernment process as it provides a way to meet with God in Scripture. Those participating in the discernment journey will be invited to practice lectio divina each morning for three weeks, working their way through the Gospel of Mark. Through the daily practice of lectio divina, God is able to highlight verses important to his leading and promptings for their life. Thompson concludes: “Lectio Divina . . . is a matter of taking in the bread of God’s Word, chewing on it, and digesting it until it brings forth new life and energy that can be shared with others.”  

35 Guigi II, The Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations, 68.
36 Thompson, Soul Feast, 26.
37 Ibid., 27.
New life and energy will come from the confidence of knowing we have received a fresh word from God. Christians worship a God who desires and longs to communicate with them and lectio divina is one of the ways they position themselves to receive his personal and intimate communication and convictions.

Teaching on the Daily Examen

A great way to pray is to look for God’s presence in daily life. More than four hundred years ago Ignatius encouraged prayer-filled mindfulness by proposing what has been called the daily examen. Ignatius himself called the prayer practice “examination of conscience.” Other terminologies used are “examination of consciousness” or “consciousness examination.” The daily examen is a technique of prayerful reflection on the events of the day in order to detect God’s presence and to discern his direction. Gallagher writes:

A further aid to discernment is the examen prayer (SpirEx 43) through which the one discerning attends to God’s workings beyond the formal time of prayer, in the course of the day. Ignatius’s great esteem for this daily prayer as a means of discernment is widely recognised. Knowledge of and regular practice of the examen prayer will greatly bless the discernment process.39 The examen is typically used at the end of the day; it is a way to keep one accountable to the task of pursuing God and his Kingdom. This exercise can also be done over an extended period of time, whether it be an examination of the last week, month or year. The longer the time frame, the more time is needed. Flemming affirms the value of the examen prayer “to detect God’s presence and to discern his will through close

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39 Gallagher, Discerning the Will of God, 63.
attention to the subtle interior movements of God’s spirit.”

Those engaging with the discernment journey outlined in this project will be encouraged to practice the daily examen each evening for the three-week journey. The daily examen Ignatius outlined in the Spiritual Exercises has five points: gratefulness for God’s blessings, asking for the Spirit’s help, review of the day, repenting for sin; praying for grace and God’s help for the next day. Over the years various versions of the examen have been developed; they are based on the same insights, but may differ on emphasis. For the sake of simplicity, this project has trimmed the five stages of the examen prayer to five words: gratefulness, asking, review, repentance and grace.

The daily examen prayer begins with looking back over the day through the lens of gratefulness. One calls to mind anything for which she is grateful, savours it and gives thanks for it. The focus for her gratefulness may be certain people, the weather, an unexpected kindness, a conversation, a gift, a smile, feeling healthy or even the simplicity of beauty in nature. Martin adds: “Savoring slows us down. In the daily examen we don’t recall an important experience simply to add it to a list of things that we’ve seen or done; rather we savor as if it were a satisfying meal. We pause to enjoy what has happened. It’s a deepening of our gratitude to God, revealing the hidden joys of our days.”

The second stage of the daily examen is inviting and asking the Holy Spirit to walk with one during this prayer. Mark Thibodeaux writes: “I ask God to fill me with His

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40 Flemming, What is Ignatian Spirituality?, 20.

41 Ibid., 21.

Spirit so that the Spirit can lead me through this difficult soul-searching. Otherwise, I’m liable to hide in denial, wallow in self-pity, or seethe in self-loathing.”° The examen prayer requires the Holy Spirit’s assistance, so one can soberly review the day and become aware of those times when he acted contrary to his better judgement or to God’s voice inside him. The voice of his conscience, enabled by the Holy Spirit, can become a helpful means for him to grow in self-awareness.

This next movement in prayer is understood as the heart of the daily examen. One reviews the entire day, from start to finish, noticing places of encounter with God. Whether in work, family life, friendships, nature, reading or anything, it is often helpful to review the day by blocks of time, by taking particular notice of times of consolation and desolation. Times when she has been moved toward greater levels of faith, hope and love and those times when she felt the opposite. During this time of review, she seeks to take notice of those things she has been drawn to. She also notes those things that have caused her discomfort or discontent. Martin advises:

Think of it as a movie playing in your head. Push the Play button and run through your day, from start to finish, from your rising in the morning to preparing to go to bed at night. Notice what made you happy, what made you stressed, what confused you, what helped you be more loving. Recall everything: sights, sounds, feelings, tastes, textures, conversations. Thoughts, words and deeds, as Ignatius says. Each moment offers a window into where God has been in your day.° Reviewing one’s day and noticing those things she has been drawn to, help her become aware of deeper longings. These longings and desires are immensely helpful as she seeks to discern God’s leading.

° Mark Thibodeaux, Re-imagining the Ignatian Examen (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2015), x-xi.

During the fourth stage of the prayer (repentance), people ask for the grace to know their sins and to free themselves from them. They seek to recall sins committed through the day, both sins of commission and omission, whether they were on purpose, habitual or inadvertent. They ask God for forgiveness for sins and for help to do better next time. Thibodeaux writes: “If I have sinned, I ask God to forgive me and set me straight again.” This prayer echoes the Lord’s Prayer when Jesus teaches his followers to pray: “And forgive us our sins as we also have forgiven those who sin against us” (Mt 6:12). Daily repentance particularly helps people become aware of those areas of sin which have become habitual, areas which may be affecting the ability to hear and respond to God’s leading.

The daily examen is completed by asking God for the grace and strength needed for the next day. One may also ask for grace for challenging things, which are on the horizon of the week ahead. Thibodeaux further explains: “I ask God to show me how tomorrow might go. I imagine the things I’ll be doing, the people I’ll see, and the decisions I’ll be mulling over. I ask for help with any moments I foresee that might be difficult.” Looking ahead to the coming day and asking God for his grace, helps her spiritually prepare for all that God has in store. This part of the prayer reminds her she is not alone, that God is already in her future and will be there for her in the coming days.

The daily examen is a valuable prayer for one seeking to discern the will of God at the crossroads of a major decision in life. Prayerfully reflecting on the events of the

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45 Thibodeaux, Re-imagining the Ignatian Examen, xi.

46 Ibid.
day helps one to detect God’s presence and his movements within; it also aids self-awareness and helps him to get in touch with his deeper longings.

Teaching on Solitude and Silence

There are certain spiritual disciplines, such as solitude and silence that help with discernment by creating space to become more aware of his leading. In the New Testament Jesus often withdraws to solitary places. In solitude and silence, Jesus enjoys intimacy with his Father and often returns from these times with greater clarity for the next step in his ministry. It seems Jesus valued solitude and silence for the purpose of discerning the Father’s will. In Mark 1, Jesus seeks out a solitary place in the midst of a busy and demanding time of ministry. The result of this time alone with the Father, gives insight into the value of solitude and silence for discernment:

As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told Jesus about her. So, he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them. That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all who were ill and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was. Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!” Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” So, he travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons (Mk 1:29-39).

The whole town was out looking for Jesus, yet the disciples were the ones who found him. They knew where to look. This pattern was likely familiar for them. This was not the first time Jesus sought a solitary place to enjoy solitude and silence with the
Father. The disciples wanted Jesus to return to the village he had been ministering in the previous night. The town likely desired to thank him, present him with a key of the city or name the local park after him in his honour. Jesus’ time in solitude and silence allowed him to draw near to the Father and gain wisdom and discernment for his next step. He returned from his solitary time with clarity of purpose. He communicated his decision, despite it likely being unpopular: “Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come” (Mk 1:38). In solitude and silence Jesus was reminded of his calling and made his decision with clarity and conviction.

Solitude and silence are the means by which people become more in tune with God. Jesus sought out solitary places, so he could spend time with the Father in prayer. Doing so helped Jesus set aside the distractions of demands and harmonise himself with his Father’s will. Willard writes: “The life in tune with God is actually nurtured by time spent alone.”47 The Psalmist writes to, “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10).

Seeking a solitary place to be still is a gift for the one seeking to draw near to God. James Bryan Smith writes: “Our world is noisy and hurried, and few of us stop to be still. The God who is good can only reach us when we are quiet.”48 Being still through solitude and silence allows the noise of one’s inner world to settle; it mutes the constant demands and quietens the relentless external voices. In fact, Willard wisely suggests: “Muddy water


48 James Bryan Smith, The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God who Jesus Knows (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 52.
becomes clear if you only let it be still for a while.”⁴⁹ Seeking to discern the will of God amidst constant noise and demands can be like trying to see through muddy water. Solitude and silence, provides the stillness a soul requires for clarity to be gained.

In silence and solitude, one discovers a posture designed to assist in listening for the voice of God. Robert Mulholland, in Invitation to a Journey, writes: “Silence is fasting from speaking to listen to God; solitude is fasting from fellowship with others to be alone with God.”⁵⁰ As one fasts from being with others and from using his words, his life becomes simpler and quieter, in this stillness he becomes more finely tuned to hearing the voice of God. Nouwen adds: “In solitude we can listen to the voice of him who spoke to us before we could speak a word.”⁵¹

The quietness and stillness of solitude and silence also offers an opportunity to ponder and meditate on one’s thoughts, desires and motivations. This space for contemplation increases self-awareness, which God uses to guide on the journey of discernment. Willard writes: “Now it is solitude and silence that allows us to escape the patterns of epidermal responses, with their consequences . . . they create a kind of inner space that permits people to become aware of what they are doing and what they are

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⁵⁰ M. Robert Mulholland, Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 136.

about to do.” Haley-Barton, who has written extensively on solitude and silence also agrees: “The capacity to recognise the voice of God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit arises out of friendship with God that is sustained through prayer, silent listening, and attentiveness to all that is going on outside us, inside us, and between us and God.”

In solitude and silence, people also lift the level of expectancy to hear from God. Jesus sought out solitary times with the Father, with an expectation that he would enjoy intimate communion with him. Haley-Barton calls this active waiting, a waiting in expectation: “Waiting on God in the silent places of the soul is an active waiting that contains a seed of expectancy and hope.” Brent Bill adds: “Quaker silence is filled with expectation – expectation that God will speak. When we hear God, our lives are changed.” Entering into solitude and silence with expectation lifts one’s hope that indeed she will meet with God and he will lead her and guide her. The more she practices solitude and silence, the more she comes to recognise the nuance of his voice and his leading. Dallas Willard writes: “In the still small voice of God we are given a message that bears the stamp of his personality quite clearly and in a way we will learn to recognise.”

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52 Willard, The Divine Conspiracy, 392.


54 Ibid., 115.


56 Willard, Hearing God, 78.
The Spiritual Discernment Retreat will provide ample opportunity for retreatants to practice solitude and silence and to experience the way God meets them in the quiet and stillness. Willard writes, “An extensive use of solitude and silence is so basic for growth of the human spirit, for they form an appropriate context for listening and speaking to God.”57 These disciplines have been greatly valued by Willard, the desert dwellers and Ignatius. Each testifies to the powerful way in which God meets his people through solitude and silence. St. Bernard of Clairvaux writes, “Continual silence, and removal from the noise of the things of this world and forgetfulness of them, lifts up the heart and asks us to think of the things of heaven and sets our heart upon them.”58 This perspective helps people to discern the will of God by framing their decisions within the context of God’s Kingdom. Solitude and silence ushers them into the presence of the Kingdom; this is a safe and illuminating place in which to discern his will.

Key Reflection Questions

The weekend Spiritual Discernment Retreat is shaped around a series of key reflection questions drawn from the teachings of the desert dwellers, Ignatius and Willard. The early desert dwellers understood the importance and value of discernment. The desert fathers and mothers sought a simple life in the desert, away from distractions, in order to develop an intimate life with God. This simplicity of life gave birth to a deepening understanding of God’s ways, as they sought to live as Jesus’ disciples. It is no wonder Christians at the time, sought out the desert dwellers for their discernment and


wisdom: “Abba Poeman said that Abba Ammonas said, ‘A man can spend his whole time carrying an axe without succeeding in cutting down the tree; while another, with experience of tree-felling brings the tree down with a few blows. He said that the axe is discernment.” 59

Ignatius is known for his wisdom on the subject of discernment. He developed the thirty-day spiritual exercises largely for the purpose of discerning the will of God. For Ignatius, discernment is an umbrella term. It is far more than making the right decision. Discernment is where prayer and action meet. Discernment is where one’s life is brought into tune with God’s continual intention and action in the world. Ignatian discernment is also immensely practical. Green writes, “Discernment is the art of finding God’s will in the concrete life situations which confront us.” 60

Willard’s writings offer a strong focus on the Kingdom of God and one’s personal discipleship to Jesus. Willard reminds his readers of the difficulty they face in discerning the will of God whilst not being concerned with seeking first the Kingdom of God. He also offers great wisdom on the various ways God speaks, which proves extremely useful for one’s journey of discernment.

The key reflection questions explore three areas designed to lead the individual toward increasing clarity for the decision being considered. The three areas for reflection are: orientation, inclination and captivation. There are four questions for each area making a total of twelve reflection questions (Appendix1). The initial phase of

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60 Green, Weeds Among the Wheat. 57.
Orientation is designed to help the individual reflect on the orientation of his life, and the importance of adopting the correct posture to discern the will of God. The second phase of reflection questions, titled inclination, is designed to lead the individual to reflect on the inclination of his heart and test for any unhealthy motives or agendas that may derail the discernment process. The third area for reflection, captivation, leads the individual to reflect on his deeper desires and inner movements. These reflection questions are designed to assist with awareness, aiding the retreatant to gain clarity for the decision being considered.

**Orientation: Is the Orientation of my Life toward God and his Kingdom?**

The orientation of one’s life will likely impact her ability to discern the will of God. For Ignatius, this is a vital question to ask when seeking to discern God’s will: “For Ignatius, the indispensable condition for making a proper discernment is that the fundamental orientation of life be right. i.e, that it be really directed toward God, so that one desires nothing more earnestly than to live in the Lord.”61 Ascertain the orientation of one’s life can be a sobering process. If her desire is to seek the will of God, then it is important to ascertain whether her life’s orientation is set toward the Kingdom of God. Willard teaches that discerning the will of God will occur more easily to those who make the Kingdom of God their first priority. In fact, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches to replace one’s concerns for worldly needs, with seeking first the Kingdom of God:

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more

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clothe you—you of little faith? So, do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Mt 6:28-33).

One’s life orientation will determine the direction a decision will take her. Orienting her life toward God and his Kingdom will see her making decisions that take into consideration God’s priorities, values and agenda. Willard suggests, “Hearing God—guidance as a reliable, day to day reality for people with good sense—is for those who are devoted to the glory of God and the advancement of his Kingdom. It is for the disciple of Jesus Christ who has no higher preference than to be like him.”

It takes great maturity and courage to reflect on this question. This question will help one determine whether his life’s orientation is toward his kingdom, or the Kingdom of God. Willard teaches that every human being has a kingdom: “Our kingdom is simply the range of our effective will. Whatever we genuinely have the say over is in our kingdom. And our having the say over something is precisely what places it within our kingdom.” This question may lead to a slight re-orientation of life, so focus is centred more directly on God and his values and priorities. A life aligned with the Kingdom of God, and lived for the pursuit of its agenda, will more likely be motivated to choose a direction in life, consistent with God’s will.

**Orientation: Am I Biased toward One Answer Over Another?** In his teaching, Ignatius explains the importance of starting a discernment process with indifference and

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63 Ibid.
detachment. If the discernment journey is entered with a pre-disposed bias and orientation toward an already desired outcome, the discernment journey is at risk of being hijacked. Indifference does not mean unconcern. Indifference means entering the discernment process with open hands; it seeks an open posture, available to be directed by God according to his will and not a biased orientation. Green writes, “Unless we are truly open to the Lord, we cannot discern.”\textsuperscript{64} Indifference means being “free to say yes wholeheartedly to God’s will.”\textsuperscript{65} Indifference allows one to be free enough to do what God wants him to do and go where God wants him to go. Indifference will keep him from being inclined toward one outcome over another. Martin writes: “What Ignatius meant by indifference was freedom. The freedom to approach each decision afresh. The ability to be detached from one’s initial biases and to step back, the willingness to carefully balance the alternatives. An openness to the working of God in one’s life”\textsuperscript{66} Freedom from a pre-disposed orientation will require detachment. Ignatius understood that disordered attachments would be detrimental to one’s capacity to freely choose the will of God. Recognizing and naming these disordered attachments is a step toward the freedom needed for discernment. These attachments are often driven by self-interest and will keep one from being truly free and open to new possibilities. Traub writes:

Readiness and confidence for personal discernment is a key element of Ignatian spirituality, and it is one that is particularly important in our times. It implies training, as well as constant attention in prayer, in evaluating actions by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, working for an attitude of detachment from self-

\textsuperscript{64} Green, \textit{Weeds Among the Wheat}, 60.

\textsuperscript{65} Gallagher, \textit{Discerning the Will of God}, 32.

interest in making decisions, and trying at all times to enter into the mind and intentions of Jesus.67

One’s preferences and leanings can consciously or unconsciously undermine his discernment journey. For this reason, it is crucial to approach major decisions from a position of detachment and indifference. In the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius defines indifference this way: “That I am not more inclined or disposed to accept the thing before me than to refuse it, not to refuse it rather than accept it, but that I find myself like a balance at equilibrium, ready to follow Whatever I perceive to be more for the glory and praise of God our Lord. (Spir Ex, 179).”68 This reflection question helps one determine whether he is entering the discernment process with an inclination toward a predetermined outcome. Choosing indifference will help him maintain a posture of freedom and openness. Being free from biases will keep him from seeking to manage and control the outcome of his discernment journey and will open his life to new possibilities.

**Orientation: Is my Decision in Keeping with my Calling?** God has a unique individual calling for each person. Reflecting on the nature of one’s calling is an important part of understanding her life orientation and the way a decision fits with her calling. Herbert Alphonso believes the greatest transformation in one’s life will occur by discovering her personal vocation:

I discerned my truest and deepest “self”, the unrepeatable uniqueness God has given to me in “calling me by name.” And I have come to realize that the discernment of that truest and deepest self is the authentic, the most profound and radical meaning of the Election that is the goal of the Ignatian Exercises. The truest and deepest self, this God-given uniqueness, I call the “personal vocation.”


68 Timothy Gallagher, *Discerning the Will of God*, 106.
Besides, my own personal experience and my ministry of the Spirit have taught me that the deepest transformation in any person's life takes place in the living out of this very personal vocation.69

Discerning God’s will, for major life decisions, is eased as one comes to understand and appreciate the personal vocation to which God is calling her. Alphonso continues: “The personal vocation is the unique God-given life script, or life-line, or even synthesis pattern in life.”70 Knowing one’s God-given life script and calling will assist her greatly on the discernment journey. Alphonso views discernment as the unique way in which God wants one to be and to live in this world. Gaining vocational clarity will help a person with all other decisions she makes: “I am convinced that the personal vocation, once discovered, becomes the criterion of discernment for every decision in life, even for the daily details of decision making.”71

As Catherine of Siena is reputed to have said: “Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.”72 One’s personal calling in life will see him living his life with fullness and joy, energy and enthusiasm, purpose and peace. Every decision will be easier to discern once there is clear understanding of one’s vocational calling.

Discerning one’s vocation always includes God’s dream for the world and the part she is to play in this dream. Ignatius invites readers to look at the world from God’s perspective, with his eyes, and then to discern the part he has each to play. Frederick


70 Ibid., 38.

71 Ibid., 43.

Buechner offers a helpful definition, “The place God calls you to, is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Discovering the intersection of one’s gladness and the world’s hunger will certainly help a person to determine the area of her unique calling in life.

Ignatius offers methods of prayer, designed to help in discerning God’s call on one’s life and what that call might mean for the way one serves the Kingdom of God through vocation: “Where does God call you to serve him through helping other people? Ignatian prayer leads to a practical choice about how to live in the world, how to make the gospel credible and vital, how to incarnate within oneself the values of the kingdom.” Rose Mary Dougherty, author of, *Discernment: A Path to Spiritual Awakening*, draws from Ignatius’ teaching when she encourages seeking self-knowledge, “the growing awareness of who we truly are – who we are in God. We seek this knowledge so we can live discerning lives, living more fully who we are, and making choices congruent with our true identity.”

The Scriptures say that God has a vocational calling for each person. God has plans for all to contribute uniquely in the world: “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph 2:10). Once clarity has been gained, with regard to calling, Scripture encourages living into it: “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (Eph 4:1b). Exploring

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75 Rose Mary Dougherty, *Discernment: A Path to Spiritual Awakening* (Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press, 2009), 34.
one’s vocation helps him connect his life with God’s big story and connects his daily life with his life with God. Alphonso writes, “One’s personal vocation is one’s unique way of being Christian.” 76 Discovering and living out his vocational calling will lead to a profound sense of significance, purpose and meaning.

This reflection question is amongst the most important to ask when seeking to discern the will of God. One’s vocational calling could be likened to discovering which highway God wants her to travel on in his Kingdom. Every other decision will be viewed within this context; thus, can be likened to seeking which lane God wants her to travel in, where she ought to fill her fuel tank and when to stop and rest. This question is fundamental to making sure her decision is in keeping with her calling.

**Orientation: Is my Decision in Keeping with the Way Biblical Principles are Shaping my Life?** Scripture is an important guide when seeking to discern God’s will. Discernment requires reflection on whether one’s life is oriented toward the principles found in Scripture. The desert dwellers viewed Scripture as the written Word of God and believed that spending regular time in Scripture allowed God’s Word to shape one’s life. Jason Byassee writes, “It is the profoundest of realities that the Word of God shapes hearts as water does a rock – slowly, almost indiscernibly, but certainly, so that after years, one can look back and see its work. (XVIII 16).” 77

The more time spent in Scripture, the more one’s heart and mind will be shaped by it. Considering how Scripture has been shaping one’s life will help him discern which

76 Alphonso, *Discovering Your Personal Vocation*, 46.

direction God is leading. The desert dwellers sought the wisdom of the Scriptures in
everything they did. From the Sayings of the Desert Fathers: “Someone asked Abba
Anthony, “What must one do in order to please God?’ The old man replied: ‘Pay
attention to what I tell you: whoever you may be, always have God before your eyes;
whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the holy Scriptures; in whatever
place you live, do not easily leave it. Keep these three precepts and you will be saved.” 78

Willard suggests the Bible was never designed to give answers to every possible
situation in life. Instead, God designed it to give principles to live by, principles which
have guided Christ-followers for thousands of years. He writes: “Our reverence for and
faith in the Bible must not be allowed to blind us to the need for personal divine guidance
within the principles of the Bible, but beyond the details of what it explicitly says.” 79

An effective discernment journey requires awareness of the way biblical
principles have been shaping one’s life so far. Willard writes that God will continue to
lead according to these principles and his leading and voice will never contradict biblical
principles: “In order to qualify for the voice of God, a thought, perception or other
experience must conform to the principles—the fundamental truths—of Scripture. It is
the principles, not the incidentals, of Scripture that count here.” 80

Whilst seeking to discern God’s will, it is comforting to know his voice will
always echo through biblical principles. Willard explains, “No specific word that is from

78 Sourozh, Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 2.

79 Willard, Hearing God, 47.

80 Ibid., 172.
God will ever contradict such (biblical) principles. Such principles place an iron-clad restriction on what content can come with God’s voice.”\(^8^1\) Spending time studying and understanding the Bible and familiarizing oneself with its principles is a valuable investment of one’s time, and will help in discerning God’s leadings and recognizing his voice more clearly.

This question reminds people to recognize how Scripture has been shaping their lives. Major decisions should always be viewed through the wisdom of biblical principles and in particular those Scriptures, which have impacted one greatly and shaped the course of his life so far.

**Inclination: Am I Making Central what Should be Peripheral?** Discerning God’s will requires a critical assessment of one’s priorities in case one find himself inclined toward a priority which is draws him away from a deep and rich life with God. It is wise to avoid the temptation to take peripheral matters and make them central. The enemy will seek to distract with peripheral matters by giving them more value than they deserve. Examples of peripheral matters which have the potential to distract from God’s calling could include hobbies or sports which take priority over relationships, material possessions which inundate thought life and attention, relationships which draw one away from a deep and rich life with God, a career which compromises one’s values. Abba Poeman’s advice is: “Do not give your heart to that which does not satisfy the heart.”\(^8^2\) Poeman gives an invitation to honestly assess whether one is seeking to gain greater

\(^8^1\) Willard, *Hearing God*, 173.

satisfaction or meaning from something, which clearly ought to be peripheral to life. Growing a discerning heart will help one know the difference between daily necessities and occasional pleasures. A wise person will know the difference between the two and live accordingly. “Wisdom is proved right by her deeds,” (Mt 11:19b, NIV), writes Matthew the Apostle. A discerning life will act wisely: “Abba Hyperichius said, He who teaches others by his life and not his speech is truly wise.”83 This reflection question will help people gain wisdom through genuinely assessing whether they are making central what ought to be peripheral to their lives.

**Inclination: Am I Choosing the Easy Solution?** This reflection questions helps one become aware of the danger of being inclined toward a quick, easy and expedient solution. When facing an important decision, the temptation can be to settle for what is simple and uncomplicated. During the process of discernment, it is important to be aware of this temptation and seek to avoid making decisions based on convenience and ease. Abba Paesius suggests: “If a monk can overcome two things, he can become free from the world. His brother asked him what these two things were and he said bodily ease and vainglory.”84 Seeking an easy solution can be very appealing. It takes less work and the struggle for decision-making is over with. Nevertheless, the easy solution may be the wrong solution. A desire for mental and bodily ease may be doing lead to a disservice. Abba Poeman once said: “When self-will and ease become habitual, they overthrow a


man.”\textsuperscript{85} Challenging the easy solution will help one from being lured toward the expedient and most convenient decision.

\textit{Acedia} is the passion, which may tempt one toward an easy solution. \textit{Acedia} is a “restless boredom that makes our ordinary tasks seem too dull to bear. Evagrius says it makes ‘the day (seem) fifty hours long’. Nothing seems right; life has lost its savor and it all seems somebody else’s fault so that the only alternative is to leave everything and go off somewhere else.”\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Acedia} can undermine motivation for seeking God’s best and lead instead toward making a decision based on what is easiest. \textit{Acedia} can lead a person to be unstable and feckless, lacking initiative and strength of character and acting irresponsibly. This reflection question will challenge people to face the temptation for an easy solution, rather than engaging in the harder work of seeking God’s best solution, in keeping with his will.

\textbf{Inclination: Am I Choosing the Most Loving Option?} This reflection question invites a person to assess whether she is inclining herself to the option that is most loving. The safest guide for discerning the will of God is the lens of love. By apprenticing oneself to Jesus and choosing to live as he lived, whatever the nature of the decision contemplated, Jesus will always lead toward the most loving option. Willard writes: “Love is not God, but God is love. It is who he is, his very identity. And our world, under a God like that, is a place where it is safe to do and be what is good and what is right.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 178.

\textsuperscript{86} Bondi, \textit{To Love as God Loves}, 74.
Living in love as Jesus defines it by his words and deeds is the sure way to know Christ in the modern world."^{87}

Jesus summarized the law in two simple commandments, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these” (Mk 12:30-31). Considering a decision through the background of love will help one determine which option will lead toward an increase in love for God and others. The following questions could also be asked: “What option will support me to increasingly love God with all my heart? What option will give space for my soul to expand its love for God? What option will give room for my mind to intensify its love for God? What option will cultivate an even stronger love for God?”

John Cassian esteems love as the highest end. He believed discernment ought to be guided by that which will encourage a person to grow in love. Cassian writes: “We should strive to rise from fear to hope and from hope to love of God and of virtue. We should pass over to love of goodness itself, and so far, as is possible for human nature, we should cling immovably to it.”^{88}

In addition, it is wise to consider the Great Commandment through the filter of one’s neighbour. The following questions could be asked: “What option will encourage me to express an even greater love for my spouse, children, parents and family? What option will give me the best opportunity to grow in love for my neighbour, my friends

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^{87} Willard, *Knowing Christ Today*, 93.

and colleagues?” Sifting a decision through the filter of love will further assist someone on their discernment journey.

This reflection question places the Great Commandment front and centre in a discernment journey. Bypassing the priority of love in decision-making could risk choosing something, which leads a person away from the one thing he ought to be growing toward - love.

**Inclination: Is my Decision in Keeping with what Jesus would do, if he were Me?** A journey of discernment is aided by orienting life toward those things one could imagine Jesus doing, if he were living in that person’s place. It is wise to consider how a decision might reflect the kind of decision he would make. Being a disciple of Jesus is ultimately learning from Jesus how to lead one’s life, as he would lead her life, if he were her.\(^{89}\) Jesus is the greatest example of a life well lived in the Kingdom of God. Willard writes:

> The kingdom is for whole life and for all of life. Jesus is not just a sacrificial lamb whose death gets us off the hook of our guilt. He is also the reigning Lord of all. The result of this declaration, by word and example, will be the people who emerge into discipleship to him. . . . They are the ones who have decided to learn from Jesus how to lead their life—all of it, their actual existence—in the kingdom of God. Practically, that means they are becoming, in the fellowship of disciples, people who routinely and easily do in all real-life circumstances the kinds of things Jesus did and said.\(^{90}\)

This reflection question helps a person consider the orientation of his life, as it relates to the life of Jesus. As he seeks to follow Jesus, he increasingly becomes aware of his way and his approach to issues and circumstances. One begins to orient his life

\(^{89}\) Willard, *Knowing Christ Today*, 54.

\(^{90}\) Ibid., 209.
toward the way Jesus might live one’s life, living in this century, dealing with these circumstances and facing these decisions. Eugene Peterson writes:

To follow Jesus implies that we enter into a way of life that is given character and shape and direction by the one who calls us. To follow Jesus means picking up rhythms and ways of doing things that are often unsaid but always derived from Jesus, formed by the influence of Jesus. To follow Jesus means that we can’t separate what Jesus is saying from what Jesus is doing and the way he is doing it.91

Orienting one’s life toward Jesus and the Kingdom of God will certainly help on the journey of discernment. Reflecting on how Jesus himself might approach a decision may give insights to help tune in to his leading.

Captivation: What’s the Nature of my Heart’s Deepest Desires and Longings? This reflection question is designed to tap into the option, which most captivates one’s heart. One’s deepest longings and desires can tell much about the direction she ought to take. Theophan the Recluse implores: “Find a place in your heart and speak there with the Lord. It is the Lord’s reception room.”92 Inviting God’s presence in the deepest desires of one’s heart will open a door to the longings that God uses to help one discern his will. Jim Manney writes: “Ignatius’s great discovery was that we can discern the right path by listening to the language of our hearts. Discernment is about noticing and interpreting those deep currents of feeling that shape what we want, which

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in turn influence what we do.” Ignatius does not disregard the importance of reason and intellect, “But he thought that the rivers of feelings and emotion are where God’s leading can most readily be found.”

Discernment is not just about reading emotions. Though longings and desires include emotions, they go much deeper than emotions, to the heart. One’s heart is the core of her being, the place where love resides. For this reason, Jesus tells his followers: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt 6:21). Jesus warned about the heart: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Mt 15:19). Jesus also counsels of the danger when actions betray the heart: “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Mt 15:8). The truth is that one’s heart represents her true self. Tapping into the deepest desires and longings of the heart, will help one get in touch with her true self. Discernment is seeking to align actions with one’s deepest desires. Pedro Arrupe sums up well what Ignatius had in mind:

> Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings, how you will spend your weekends, what you read, whom you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.

This reflection question invites people to consider their heart’s greatest love, awakening them to their deepest desires. Such longings, says Arrupe, seizes one’s imagination and


94 Ibid.

motivates him to get up in the morning. These desires are pointers, leading him in the
direction of God’s will.

**Captivation: What will Lead me to Experience Greater Life and Love?** This
reflection question is designed to help discern which option will lead to experiencing a
greater sense of life and love. According to Traub, understanding the direction a decision
takes a person will greatly assist the discernment journey. He writes, “Discernment has to
do more with the spiritual interpretation and evaluation of feelings, and particularly with
the direction in which we are moved by them.”\textsuperscript{96} The direction God leads a person in
discernment is usually toward inner movements of life and love; this is seen in Jesus.
Traub notes: “Discernment for Jesus was whatever in him and in his mission—his
work—led to life and to love, not to death and enmity.”\textsuperscript{97}

Jesus said: “The thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy; I have come that they
may have life, and have it to the full” (Jn 10:10). The decision that captivates one’s heart
and leads to greater levels of life and love is worth pursuing. Suzanne Zuercher writes:
“Discernment necessitates a decision to flow with life or to resist it.”\textsuperscript{98} When seeking to
discern God’s will, noticing which decision leads to a greater flow of life and love is
invaluable. Mark 12:30-31 says that love is one’s greatest mission in life. Choices that
foster growth in one’s experience and expression of love will most likely be in keeping

\textsuperscript{96} Traub, *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader*, 179.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 69.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 217.
with God’s will for that person. This question helps us reflect on which decision leads us toward a deepening of both life and love.

**Captivation: Through Prayer, am I Feeling Drawn by God to one Way Over Another?** This reflection question invites a person to consider the way God is leading, drawing and captivating her. Prayer is a valuable spiritual practice, which helps someone connect with God at a heart level. It is here at this deeper level, that the desert dwellers believed God could draw a person toward his will. It is in prayer that one’s heart can be aligned with God’s heart. Byassee writes:

A later saying suggests (the) view of “vocation”, that is, the search for God’s call on our lives: “Surely all works please God equally? Scripture says. Abraham was hospitable and God was with him; Elijah loved quiet and God was with him; David was humble and God was with him.” So, whatever you find you are drawn to in following God’s will, do it and let your heart be at peace. (1:11)\(^99\)

Whilst praying over a decision, it is worth noting which way one’s heart is being drawn. Matthew the Poor notes the value prayer has in aligning one’s will with God’s:

“Through prayer, our will becomes like that of Christ. Through prayer, we gain his Spirit and are conformed to his will. His power thus rests upon us. Without prayer, man cannot know what the will of Christ is in relation to himself.”\(^100\) Prayer is an opportunity to bring a decision before God with openness and transparency. In prayer, thoughts are shared with God, and more importantly, one’s hearts listens for his voice and leading. In prayer a person will become aware of the way the Holy Spirit is slowly drawing her toward one decision over another. In prayer the heart begins to be captured by the will of God.

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\(^100\) Matthew the Poor, *Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 35.
For the desert dwellers, hearing from God directly was an important part of discernment: “Desert ascetics cultivated a heart engaged in intense listening. Listening for the Beloved’s voice cultivated a wise and compassionate heart, able to yield to the movements of the Holy Spirit. Listening to the ebbs and flows of the Spirit was fundamental to a life of discernment.”101 This reflection question reminds people of the important role prayer plays in the discernment process. Not only is God able to speak to him through prayer, but “In prayer, God’s personal will and ours meet.”102

Captivation: For what Outcome am I Feeling Most Consolation? This final reflection question helps the retreatant to determine which option provides the greater feeling of consolation. For Ignatius, consolation will always follow the successful discernment of God’s will. When one’s heart is captivated with an outcome for a decision being considered, then feelings of consolation will subsequently be present. The inner movements of the spirit and one’s internal heart desires will experience hope and life, “true joy and spiritual gladness,”103 when consolation is present. Flemming writes: “When we are presented with alternative courses of action that all seem attractive to some degree, and we are not blessed with a clear certainty about what to do . . . Ignatius says that we can discern the right choice by attending to the inner movements of our


102 Matthew the Poor, Orthodox Prayer Life, 35.

103 Gallagher, Spiritual Consolation, 32.
spirit. In particular feelings of consolation and desolation will signal the correct course of action.”

Gallagher explains the way consolation leads one to the wisest decision by quoting Ignatius himself: “This spiritual consolation, Ignatius writes, ‘casts out all disturbance and draws a person to complete love of the Lord’; it ‘shows us and opens to us the way that we are to follow.” This question helps a person apply an important piece of Ignatian discernment, the art of recognizing the inner movements of God in one’s life. Spiritual consolation is a helpful sign of God’s presence and activity. According to Ignatius, consolation will always be present at the meeting place of God’s will and one’s deepest desires. When this occurs, her heart has been captivated.

Understanding the Role of Spiritual Direction

Christian spiritual direction is one of the Church’s ancient and mystical traditions. At its heart, spiritual direction is a ministry of listening and bringing one’s attention to God. Pickering suggests: “Spiritual direction is about listening to people’s stories, listening for glimpses of grace and hints of the holy, listening for the break though presence of God in the midst of ordinary life.”

As early as the fourth century, Christians sought out the advice and wisdom of the desert dweller in the deserts of Palestine, Syria and Egypt, to learn how to live entirely for God. Succeeding generations continued the search for reliable listening guides and mentors. Throughout the centuries,

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104 Flemming, What is Ignatian Spirituality?, 92.

105 Gallagher, Spiritual Consolation, 32.

106 Pickering, Spiritual Direction, xiii.
respected spiritual figures such as Ignatius, Catherine of Sienna, John of the Cross, Francis de Sales and Teresa of Avila continued this tradition, guiding Christians who longed to foster a personal and intimate relationship with God.

In the twenty-first century, spiritual direction continues to follow these wise men and women, while adapting to other ways that might assist a person to nurture his life with God and discern his will. The spiritual director is a spiritual companion who listens to a person, helps talk about his life with God, helps him to notice God’s presence in the ordinary moments of life, helps him discern God’s leading and helps him respond to God with greater freedom and faith. William Barry and William Connolly define spiritual direction as, “Help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship.”

The ministry of spiritual direction assists one’s discernment journey by inviting someone to walk alongside a person to help her notice God’s presence and movement in her life. Spiritual direction assists her in awareness of God’s leading and supports her as she seeks to respond to God’s invitations. Barry and Connolly add:

Spiritual direction that stems from the heart of the Christian tradition has no axes to grind, no pet theories on which its efficacy depends. It is primarily concerned with helping individuals freely to place themselves before God who

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communicates to them and makes them more free. The focus of the direction is on God and the way God seems to relate to each person, never on ideas.\textsuperscript{108}

Spending time with a spiritual director invites a person to explore the deeper movements of the soul with honesty and vulnerability before God. A spiritual director will walk with him to the darker, less trodden places of his soul where his deeper and unconscious resistances lie. Gordon Jeff writes: “Spiritual direction is partly about helping people to overcome their resistance and evasion and try to face God directly.”\textsuperscript{109} One’s resistances can often be a window into something more significant. Exploring resistances is an important part of uncovering one’s deeper apprehensions and fears, which may prevent him from making a brave and bold decision for the future.

Barry and Connolly explain how spiritual direction is also a safe place where someone can explore her deeper desires and longings: “Spiritual directors encourage their directees to ask for what they want from God. In the beginning their desires may be very broad: to experience God’s presence, to know God better, for instance. Such requests should reflect their real desires, and part of the work of spiritual directors is to help directees to clarify and say what they really want.”\textsuperscript{110} It is comforting and uplifting to engage in a relationship where permission is given to share one’s deepest dreams and desires. Giving attention to these deeper reflections can lead to exploring directions for the future, which have so far, remained beyond one’s imagination. Phillips appreciates

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\begin{enumerate}
\item Barry and Connolly, \textit{The Practice of Spiritual Direction}, 44.
\item Barry and Connolly, \textit{The Practice of Spiritual Direction}, 52.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
that “much of the work of spiritual direction involves the gentle direction of attention.”

A spiritual director helps someone pay attention to all of the inner workings of her soul—both resistances and desires—and helps her interpret these for the sake of clarification and discernment.

The discernment journey benefits with greater clarity. Meeting regularly with a spiritual director, invites people into a conversation where confusion can give way to clarity. John H. Wright said, “The Primary function of spiritual direction is to provide assistance in two areas, that of clarification and that of discernment.”

Clarification and discernment go hand-in-hand. With increasing clarification of one’s inner feelings and movements, and greater illumination of one’s desires and longings, one’s heart will more easily be positioned to discern the pathway ahead, leading to joy, freedom and life. Jeff writes of the important role the Holy Spirit plays for bringing clarification and helping discern God’s leading: “Direction, as I understand it, is two people sitting down together in an attitude of prayer to try and discern where the Holy Spirit is directing.”

Meeting with a spiritual director is valuable for the discernment process. With a spiritual director one is able to safely process his thinking, inner movements, feelings, resistances and desires. Once clarity is gained and implications assessed, he is then positioned to respond to the God who is leading him. Thomas Hart agrees: “God is the deepest dimension in all the areas of human life, and thus all areas are open to spiritual

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113 Jeff, *Spiritual Direction for Every Christian*, 12.
direction. The purpose of direction will be to sensitize people further to the presence and action of God in their lives, and to assist them to make a fuller and more appropriate response to it.”

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CHAPTER SIX
IMPLEMENTATION AND ASSESSMENT PROCESS

**Target Participants**

The target audience for the discernment journey and Spiritual Discernment Retreat outlined in this project are members of Coast Community Church, standing at the crossroads of a major life-changing decision. The aim is to provide an opportunity for these participants to carve aside time and space to devote to a successful discernment process. The Spiritual Discernment Retreat seeks to provide the principles and practices found in Scripture and synthesised through the teaching of the desert dwellers, Ignatius and Willard, with the hope of leading these participants toward a faithful discernment of God’s will.

**Timeline**

The implementation process includes a timeline for the teaching material and resources for the entire discernment journey. This material was developed in time for the retreat to be held and the discernment journey completed. The material and resources were completed by the end of October 2018 in readiness for the creation of teaching
notes for the Preparation Evening in early November 2018 and the Spiritual Discernment Retreat later in November 2018.

Advertising and recruiting participants for the discernment retreat began in early August 2018. A total of eight individuals applied. One person subsequently pulled out due to other commitments. A total of seven individuals took part in the discernment journey and Spiritual Discernment Retreat. All participants identified with standing at the crossroads of a major decision in life and were ready to begin the discernment journey.

The location chosen for the retreat was St. Benedict’s Monastery in Arcadia, Sydney. The monastery sits on one-hundred acres with ample space for retreatants to enjoy solitude and silence. The monastery offers a sacred space, which invites reflection and prayer. Opportunity is also available for individuals to partake in the daily office with the monks. A labyrinth is also located in the garden to provide another type of reflective prayer opportunity. In fact, one participant found the labyrinth prayer experience extremely moving. Logistics for the retreat were taken care of with catering arranged and participant guides produced for the entire discernment journey. Timetables were developed for the introduction evening, the weekend retreat and the celebration evening. These can be perused in Appendix 4.

The retreat was held in mid-November 2018. This allowed for the Celebration evening to occur the week after. It also gave time for the questionnaires to be completed and the assessments made.
Assessment Plan

The assessment plan included two tools designed to ascertain the effectiveness of the entire discernment journey. The first assessment tool, the *Discernment Retreat Feedback Questionnaire* (Appendix 2) is a questionnaire designed to give feedback on the helpfulness of the various elements of the discernment journey. This questionnaire invited participants to score the effectiveness of these elements, from one to nine. One reflected what was most helpful and nine represented what was least helpful for discerning the will of God. This questionnaire invited participants to evaluate the teachings on indifference, consolation and desolation and solitude and silence; the *examen*; *lectio divina* and the theological framework of Jeremiah 6:16. This questionnaire also assessed each individual reflection question, to see which were most helpful, for the purpose of discerning the will of God. The *Discernment Retreat Feedback Questionnaire* also sought feedback regarding the nature of the three-week framework. It was helpful to determine whether practicing the spiritual exercises of *examen* and *lectio divina* for two weeks prior to the retreat actually benefited the discernment journey. Likewise, it was also interesting to see whether the confirmation week after the retreat was also profitable.

A second assessment tool was also developed, called the *Discernment Assessment Questionnaire* (Appendix 3). This questionnaire was designed to assess whether the discernment journey and Spiritual Discernment Retreat assisted individuals with their overall understanding of the principles and practices required to discern the will of God. This assessment tool was completed three times. The first occasion was at the Introductory Evening, at the start of the discernment journey. This was completed to
determine the participants’ level of understanding and experience with discerning the will of God. The questionnaire was completed a second time, at the Celebration Evening, which closed the discernment journey. Comparing the responses at the end of the discernment journey to the ones three weeks prior, helped to ascertain the level of benefit the discernment journey and retreat provided, for the purpose of discerning the will of God. Two months after the end of the discernment journey, the questionnaire will be taken once again to assess whether the principles and practices taught in the discernment journey have helped participants adopt a greater lifestyle of discernment. In particular, it was interesting to assess whether the learning through the discernment journey had helped participants to discern God’s will in other decisions presented in life.

**Summary Results**

The results of the two assessment tools provide a helpful overview of what was most beneficial for seeking to discern God’s will when standing at the crossroads of a major life decision. Both questionnaires have proved greatly beneficial in determining what was most and least helpful in the discernment journey.

**Discernment Retreat Feedback Questionnaire**

The *Discernment Retreat Feedback Questionnaire* seeks to assess the content, framework, principles and practices taught and experienced during the discernment journey. The first section invited feedback over the various teaching and practises for discernment. Participants were invited to rank various elements on a scale from one to nine. These figures were collated and then averaged to produce a ranking.
The highest ranked feedback was the teaching on Jeremiah 6:16, with an average score of 1.4; it was apparent that participants greatly appreciated the way this theological framework aided the discernment journey. The next most valuable element, with an average score of 1.6, was the teaching on and practice of solitude and silence. Equal in ranking, was the teaching on and practice of *lectio divina*. Third, with an average score of 1.7, was the teaching on Indifference and Consolation and Desolation. The key reflection questions were next most helpful, with an average score of 1.8 and interestingly, least helpful was the *examen* with a score of 2.4. A few participants expressed that despite appreciating the teaching on the *examen*, putting it into practice during the three-week journey was a challenge. Most encouraging was the high scores given across the board, for the various elements of the discernment journey. The teaching strategy appears to be beneficial for assisting participants grow in their understanding and practice of discernment. I also recognise that the *examen* needs to be experienced as well as taught. Guiding participants through the *examen* at the Introductory Evening may have helped.

The next assessment was focused on the twelve reflective questions offered during the retreat (Appendix 1). Participants were invited to rank each question from a scale of one to nine, using the same scale as the last assessment. The twelve questions were divided into three separate categories with four questions in each category. The first category was *Orientation*, followed by *Inclination* and concluding with *Captivation*. Interestingly, the highest average ranking, according to category, were the *Orientation* questions, followed by the *Captivation* questions and finally the *Inclination* questions. When assessing each question separately across categories, it was interesting to note that
in first, equal, with the highest possible average score of 1.0 were two Captivation questions. All participants greatly valued the questions: “Through prayer, am I feeling drawn by God to one way over another,” and “For what outcome am I feeling most consolation?” These questions were viewed as most helpful by participants when nearing the close of the discernment journey. Some found the nuance between being driven and being drawn toward a decision, made all the difference to their discernment of God’s will. Others appreciated the distinction between consolation and desolation, and found that discernment became easier through their increasing awareness of God’s consolation.

The next most beneficial question was an Inclination question: “Am I making central what should be peripheral?” This question scored an average of 1.1 and resonated with many participants, helping them differentiate between what was central and non-central to their calling, values and priorities. The third highest ranked question, with a 1.3 average score, was in the Orientation category. This question invited participants to reflect on how their decision relates to their calling: “Is my decision in keeping with my calling?” Retreat members appreciated the teaching on calling and likewise valued the opportunity to view their discernment question through the lens of personal calling. In equal fourth ranking, with a 1.4 average score, came two Orientation questions: “Is the orientation of my life toward God and his Kingdom?” and “Am I biased toward one answer over another?” These questions launched the series of reflective questions. Participants valued the way the first question challenged them to consider the overall orientation of their life. Many appreciated that discerning God’s will firstly relies on aligning our life with the Kingdom of God. A life oriented toward ourselves will struggle
to discern God’s will. The second question drew much attention. Participants understood and appreciated the need for entering the discernment journey with indifference, yet, many struggled to maintain indifference through the discernment journey. Regularly circling back to this question, proved helpful for many, in seeking to sustain a posture of indifference.

In fifth ranking was the *Inclination* question: “Is my decision in keeping with what Jesus would do, if he were me?” With an average ranking of 1.6, this was obviously a deeply valued reflection question. This question assisted participants to consider their discernment, through the lens of the life of Jesus and what he would choose, if he were in their unique situation. In sixth, with an average ranking of 1.8, came the *Orientation* question: “Is my decision in keeping with the way Biblical principles are shaping my life?” Participants shared how they valued looking back over their lives, noticing the way God had used Scripture to shape the course of their lives so far. Participants appreciated that God’s will for their lives in the future, will likely be shaped by the way God has directed them in the past.

The seventh highest rated question, with an average score of 2.0, came from the *Captivation* category: “What’s the nature of my heart’s deepest desires and longing?” Some participants found this question very liberating in comparison with the experience of past teaching, which fed a mistrust of feelings when discerning God’s will. For some, exploring one’s deepest desires and longings, opened a new world of imagination for the discernment journey. Others felt it was important to keep this question toward the end of the discernment process, as desires could lead one astray if one has not done the prior
work of orientating one’s life toward the Kingdom of God and personal calling.

Eighth, with an average score of 2.1, was the Captivation question: “What will lead me to experience greater life and love?” Participants appreciated connecting discernment with their heart’s and soul’s experiences of a growing fullness of life and love. Lastly, in ninth position, were two Inclination questions with the average score of 2.3. Firstly: “Am I choosing the easy solution?” The struggle for some with this question related to the thought of always reconciling the discernment of God’s will with a challenging and demanding step. Sometimes this may be the case, at other times, the easier step may be the one God is inviting one to take. Secondly: “Am I choosing the most loving option?” This question ranked equally, as some felt that seeking to always be choosing what was most loving toward others, may lead to making a decision from a sense of duty and obligation, rather than God’s leading, which in some circumstances may appear selfish. These twelve questions, shaped around the categories of Orientation, Inclination and Captivation, led participants on a deep journey of personal reflection. Given the average ranking for all questions ranged from 1.0 to 2.3, participants observably felt they were profitable for the purpose of discerning God’s will.

Another phase of the Discernment Retreat Feedback Questionnaire, sought to gain responses regarding the various elements of the discernment journey. Of highest overall ranking with an average maximum score of 1.0 was the Spiritual Discernment Retreat. All of the participants greatly valued the retreat and expressed that the location, content and format, perfectly suited the purpose of discerning the will of God. The second most appreciated element was the Introductory Evening and the Two-Week
Preparation period. Both of these scored an average of 1.7. The Introduction Evening was appreciated for the foundational teaching on indifference, consolation and desolation, as well as establishing the listening practices of lectio divina and examen. A number also valued the explanation of the overall approach for the upcoming discernment journey. Additionally, some expressed appreciation for meeting fellow participants with whom they were sharing the discernment journey. The only suggestion for the preparation evening was to include more time for prayer. The Two-Week Preparation period which likewise shared a 1.7 ranking, was valued for the way it launched the listening practices in one’s life. Participants were invited to practice lectio divina each day, working through the Gospel of Mark. Some found walking with Jesus through the book of Mark extremely beneficial. For others, the evening examen, practiced for these two weeks, proved valuable for tuning into inner consolations and desolation. Some participants shared they found it difficult to engage with the examen. The Celebration Evening was the next most beneficial element, with an average score of 1.9. Participants appreciated closing the discernment journey by hearing one another’s deliberations, reflections and findings. Members also valued praying for one another as they continued the discernment journey or sought to step into decisions made. The sense of gratitude and celebration was evident by everyone, whether a decision was arrived at or not.

The least scoring element of the discernment journey was the Confirmation Week, with an average score of 3.6. Some participants found themselves landing in a busy week, with an inability to keep up the daily practices. Others, simply felt the Confirmation Week did not benefit the process greatly, as they had already come to a decision by the
end of the retreat. In conclusion, it seems the retreat itself was certainly the most valuable experience for the discernment journey. Preceding the retreat with an introductory evening, to allow for two weeks preparation is certainly beneficial. The confirmation week though, did not seem to achieve the intended goal. In the future, it may be worth considering concluding the discernment journey at the end of the retreat.

The final aspect of the Discernment Retreat Feedback Questionnaire was an opportunity for participants to offer their thoughts and insights on what was most and least helpful in the discernment journey. Responses relating to the most helpful elements for discerning the will of God included: the teaching on indifference, consolation and desolation; life orientation; considering what was peripheral and central to one’s life; the heart’s deepest desire, the difference between being drawn and being driven; personal calling and the Jeremiah 6:16 framework. The practices that participants most valued included lectio divina on the book of Mark, reflection questions, Ignatian discernment practices and solitude and silence. Participants also appreciated the variety of quotes and wisdom from the desert dwellers, Ignatius and Willard. Appreciation was also expressed for the two-week preparation period. The main response relating to the least helpful element of the discernment journey was the examen. Recommendations were given to leave more room in the participant notes to allow opportunity for increased personal note taking. A suggestion was also offered to allow more time for praying for one another and hearing one other’s stories through the discernment journey. Some also proposed the benefit of offering spiritual direction sessions after the retreat, especially for those still seeking to discern the will of God.
The *Discernment Retreat Feedback Questionnaire* was a valuable tool for assessing the effectiveness of the discernment journey and the Spiritual Discernment Retreat. Consideration needs to be given with the way the *examen* is taught if it is to be of benefit to the discernment process. One might also consider whether the discernment journey may close at the end of the retreat, rather than adding the Confirmation Week. Overall, it seemed that the material, practices and framework of the discernment journey proved valuable. With some further adjustments, the discernment journey could be improved and made even more effective.

**Discernment Assessment Questionnaire**

This second questionnaire was completed at the start and end of the discernment journey. This questionnaire seeks to determine how effective the discernment journey was for participants’ understanding, knowledge and experience of discernment. A comparison was made for each question, before and after the journey. These results were averaged across participant responses to assess the difference between the responses made at the start, to those made at the end. The second questionnaire was completed without the ability to reference the earlier one.

The first question: “I understand how my calling in life impacts my decision,” scored a 25 percent improvement from the beginning to the end of the discernment journey. It is pleasing to see that participants have become increasingly aware of the importance one’s personal calling has for the discernment process.

The second question: “I have a good idea of what discerning the will of God means,” scored a high 46 percent improvement from responses given at the start, to the
finish. It is extremely encouraging to witness growth in understanding for these participants. By the end of the discernment journey, most participants experienced nearly a 50 percent increase in their understanding of what it means to discern the will of God.

The third question: “I understand the practices required to help me discern the will of God,” saw the greatest movement upward - 68 percent. The discernment journey and retreat obviously played a key role in exposing participants to the practices most helpful for discerning the will of God. Now that participants are aware of the key practices for discernment, the hope is they will continue to take advantage of these practices for future discernment challenges.

The fourth question: “I understand the steps needed to discern the will of God,” experienced the second highest movement upward, at 55 percent from the start to the finish of the discernment journey. Participants grew dramatically in their understanding of the steps needed to discern God’s will. The framework of Jeremiah 6:16 was time again referenced as one of the most helpful ways to understand the steps needed for discernment.

The fifth question: “I expect to be able to discern the will of God,” saw the least improvement upward - 22 percent. It was encouraging to see that most participants hold a greater sense of expectancy for discerning the will of God, as a result of the discernment journey. Many participants arrived with a relatively high expectancy for discernment, so it is not surprising this question did not share as much movement upward as others.

The sixth question: “I have successfully discerned the will of God in the past,” displayed an improvement of 32 percent from start to finish. It was pleasing to see five of
seven participants coming to a decision by the end of the retreat.

The seventh and final question: “I feel somewhat confident to be able to discern the will of God in the future,” saw an encouraging increase of 33 percent. This movement reveals participants are leaving the discernment journey with greater confidence to discern God’s will in the future.

Overall, the Discernment Assessment Questionnaire was a helpful tool to assess the growth participants gained in the knowledge, principles and ability to discern the will of God. When the movement of all seven questions is averaged, there was a 47 percent improvement in participants’ overall responses. The evidence seems to suggest that by participating in a Spiritual Discernment Retreat, one can expect to increase capacity to discern the will of God by nearly 50 percent. This is a great success and reason to keep offering the Spiritual Discernment Retreat in the future.

**Conclusion**

The path one chooses when standing at the cross roads of a major life-changing decision not only determines the path of her future, but in many occasions the future of those around her as well. As a pastor, I appreciate the challenges those in our congregation face when seeking to determine God’s will. Through time poverty and social isolation caused by living on the Central Coast, many in our congregation are under immense pressure to find the time, space, wisdom, energy and relationships required to discern the will of God. The full three-week discernment journey and the Spiritual Discernment Retreat, sought to provide congregants with the resources needed, to come to a point of decision.
The wisdom of the desert dwellers, Ignatius and Willard has proved valuable for the discernment journey and retreat. Though these authors are separated by one-and-a-half millennia, their insights have proved valuable for discerning the will of God in the twenty-first century. It was pleasing and encouraging to witness the way God used the Spiritual Discernment Retreat to help most participants come to a decision. Even more pleasing, was knowing that participants now feel they have the tools, resources, wisdom and framework needed to live more discerning lives. The success of the Spiritual Discernment Retreat lies in more than just assisting individuals to discern a particular decision at a given moment in time, but in training participants in ways to keep discerning the will of God, as they approach future crossroads in life.
APPENDIX 1

KEY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Orientation

1. Is the orientation of my life toward God and his kingdom?

2. Am I biased toward one answer over another?

3. Is my decision in keeping with my calling?

4. Is my decision in keeping with the way biblical principles are shaping my life?

Inclination

5. Am I making central what should be peripheral?

6. Am I choosing the easy solution?

7. Am I choosing the most loving option?

8. Is my decision in keeping with what Jesus would do, if he were me?

Captivation

9. What’s the nature of hearts deepest desires and longing?

10. What will lead me to experience greater life and love?

11. Through prayer, am I feeling drawn by God to one way over another?

12. For what outcome am I feeling most consolation?
APPENDIX 2
DISCERNMENT RETREAT FEEDBACK QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for participating in the Discernment Retreat. Your help with my Doctoral Project is appreciated. Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability as they will assist in drawing summary/conclusions of what was most helpful in discerning the will of God.

Male _____ Female ______ Years as a Christian ______

Age: 10-20 ___ 20-40 ___ 40-60 ___ 60-80 ___

In the table below please indicate how helpful you found each area of teaching and practice for your discernment journey. Please use a scale of 1-9. Any comments are also appreciated.

1 = Very Helpful 3 = Helpful 5 = Unsure 7 = Unhelpful 9 = Very Unhelpful

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching/Practice</th>
<th>Rated</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Indifference</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Consolation &amp; Desolation</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Lectio Divina</td>
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<td>4. Examen</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Solitude &amp; Silence</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Jeremiah 6:16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Key Reflection Questions</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Please indicate how helpful you found the reflection questions for the purpose of your discernment journey. Any comments are also appreciated.

1 = Very Helpful      3 = Helpful      5 = Unsure      7 = Unhelpful     9 = Very Unhelpful

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflection Question</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Orientation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Is the orientation of my life toward God and his kingdom?</td>
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<td>2. Am I biased toward one answer over another?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Is my decision in keeping with my calling?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Is my decision in keeping with the way Biblical principles are shaping my life?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Inclination</strong></td>
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<td>5. Am I making central what should be peripheral?</td>
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<td>6. Am I choosing the easy solution?</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Am I choosing the most loving option?</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Is my decision in keeping with what Jesus would do, if he were me?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Captivation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>9. What’s the nature of my hearts deepest desires and longing?</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. What will lead me to experience greater life and love?</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Through prayer, am I feeling drawn by God to one way over another?</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. For what outcome am I feeling most consolation?</td>
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</table>
Open Responses regarding the whole discernment Journey including the discernment retreat

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td><strong>What did you find least helpful for discerning the will of God?</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td><strong>What did you find most helpful for discerning the will of God?</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Please indicate how you found the process of the discernment journey over the three-week period. Please use a scale of 1-9.
1 = Very Helpful       3 = Helpful       5 = Unsure       7 = Unhelpful       9 = Very Unhelpful

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Rated</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. The Introduction Evening</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. The Two-week preparation</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. The Discernment Retreat</td>
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<td>4. The Confirmation Week</td>
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<td>5. The Celebration Evening</td>
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APPENDIX 3

DISCERNMENT ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire is designed to assess the helpfulness of the discernment journey for the purpose of discerning the will of God. Please complete this questionnaire before and after the discernment journey.

Male _____ Female _____ Years as a Christian _____ Identity _____

Age: 10-20 ____ 20-40 ____ 40-60 ____ 60-80 ____

Please indicate if you agree or disagree with the following statements on a range from 1-5

1 = Strongly Agree 3 = Agree 5 = Unsure 7 = Disagree 9 = Strongly Disagree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>1 - 9</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I understand how my calling in life impacts my decision</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. I have a good idea of what discerning the will of God means</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I understand the practices required to help me discern the will of God</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. I understand the steps needed to discern the will of God</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. I expect to be able to discern the will of God</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. I have successfully discerned the will of God in the past</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. I feel somewhat confident to be able to discern the will of God in the future.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>
# Timetable for Preparation Evening

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6:00pm</td>
<td>Greetings and Introductions over dinner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:00pm</td>
<td>Overview of the Discernment Journey &amp; Discernment Assessment Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:15pm</td>
<td>Clarification of the question for discernment for each participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:45pm</td>
<td>Teaching on Indifference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:00pm</td>
<td>Teaching on Consolation and Desolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:20pm</td>
<td>Teaching Lectio Divina as a daily practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:40pm</td>
<td>Teaching on Examen as a daily practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00pm</td>
<td>Prayer and close</td>
</tr>
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</table>
## Timetable for Weekend Retreat

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friday</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6:00pm</td>
<td>Dinner together</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7:30pm</td>
<td>Teaching on Jeremiah 6:16 as a framework for discerning the will of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9:30pm</td>
<td>Examen</td>
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<td><strong>Saturday</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7:00am</td>
<td>Lectio Divina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>7:45am</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8:30am</td>
<td>Teaching on Solitude and Silence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>9:15am</td>
<td>Teaching on the <em>Orientation</em> Reflection Questions</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Morning Tea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10:30am</td>
<td>Time for Prayerful Reflection in solitude and silence on questions of <em>Orientation</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12:30pm</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
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<td>2:00pm</td>
<td>Teaching on the <em>Inclination</em> Reflection Questions</td>
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<td>Time for Prayerful Reflection in solitude and silence on questions of <em>Inclination</em></td>
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<td>Dinner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>7:30pm</td>
<td>Sharing the journey of the day</td>
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<td>Eucharist</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Examen</td>
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<td><strong>Sunday</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7:00am</td>
<td>Lectio Divina</td>
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<td>Breakfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9:00am</td>
<td>Teaching on the <em>Captivation</em> Reflection Questions</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Time for Prayerful Reflection in solitude and silence on questions of <em>Captivation</em></td>
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<td>Lunch</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2:30pm</td>
<td>Prayer and close</td>
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BIBLIOGRAPHY


Coast Community Church. Constitution of Coast Community Church. Bensville, NSW: Coast Community Church, 2015.


