

Discerning in Community

As Archdeacon in the Episcopal Diocese of Montana, I have been given the responsibility of training the lay leaders who say yes to serving on Parish Discernment Committees. Each Committee is made up of four or five members who agree to meet with someone who has asked to discern what God might be calling them to in new directions in their lay ministry or the pursuit of ordination as a deacon or priest.

The meetings – in our tradition, at least nine of them over a period of six months or more – invite the discerner into a series of questions, reflections, and other activities with the Committee. To begin, the discerner prepares a spiritual autobiography – highlights of their faith journey to date where they have experienced a particular sense of God present or God absent. The Committee explores this with them, then asks a series of thoughtful, prayerful questions designed to help the discerner and those listening alongside them gain some additional clarity on what God might be calling them to at this stage of their journey. As they conclude, all work to reach spiritual consensus on what they have heard and learned. The meetings are modeled on Quaker practices. Some resources the Committee leans into, beyond one another, are our Diocesan Lay and Ordained Ministries Manuals, our Book of Common Prayer, the Bible, and the book *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*, by Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward.

In helping to prepare these Committee members for this work, what has been reinforced for me is the importance of questions that invite intentional, vulnerable reflection, and surrounding the discerner with a community who can help them to listen in ways far broader and deeper than one could on their own. This process becomes a gift, not just for the discerner and the Committee members, but ultimately for the health, safety, and growth of the greater church as well.

The beauty of this process is that it does not need to be limited to those who are discerning about an expanded lay or ordained life of service. Truly, it could serve anyone who finds themselves at a faith-and-action crossroads. And the process can be adapted to suit the purpose for which it is undertaken. I would recommend *Listening Hearts* as a grounding resource, along with an intentional conversation with a spiritual leader who could prayerfully listen and consider how one might be best surrounded by community for further discernment.

May all who are discerning God's call find a healthy path forward for this important work.

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