



Annual Conference Learning Day

Living the Fruit of the Spirit: Preparing the Soil

Group Discernment

Prepared by Thad Rutter, Spiritual Formation Resource Team

The prayer of discernment is a form of prayer in which believers learn to listen for divine guidance for our churches and for ourselves. It is about allowing Christ and the Holy Spirit to lead us.

Praying this prayer involves the following steps: (1) putting aside our thoughts, feeling and convictions; (2) entering into a period of silence; (3) listening for the Voice of the Spirit through a reading; (4) dialoguing with one another and letting the Spirit guide us to consensus and direction.

The experience of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Arvada, Colorado furnishes a good example of what can happen when a church turns to the practice of discernment. Pastor John Anderson tells the story in Dwight H. Judy's [Quiet Pentecost](#) (2013). The governing board of the church decided to learn the practice of discernment by going on a retreat. As a resource they used the book [Discerning God's Will Together](#) by Olsen and Morris. Pastor Anderson admits that they did not fully understand what they were doing, but they trusted that the Spirit of Jesus would lead conversation.

The elders were stunned by the results as they experienced the creativity of the Spirit among them. No one expected the conclusions to which the Spirit led them. This began a process of discernment that over the years spread throughout the church, offering meaningful direction. From these experiences, Pastor Anderson shares some important observations worthy of note by other churches. He recommends the use of Scripture to open the discernment process for groups. A person's predisposition toward certain outcomes can prevent them from hearing God's will. He recommends continuing the discernment process after a project has been implemented.

Anderson admits that he mistakenly thought that the goal of discernment was to arrive at a God-directed decision. He writes, "However, we discovered that God was more about formation" (p. 133). This process brought significant changes and spiritual growth in the lives of the people. They learned to wait patiently for the pace of the Spirit. They also learned to become more trusting about not knowing what was coming. One is reminded of Ephesians 3: 2-3: "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

To learn more about the discernment process in the lives of a variety of congregations, Dwight Judy's *A Quiet Pentecost* can be helpful. It is filled with wonderful stories of what happens to churches that learn the practice of discernment and allow Christ and the Holy Spirit to lead them.

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Lectio Divina

Prepared by Barbara Cook, Spiritual Formation Resource Team

Introduction

- Definition: *Lectio Divina* is a form of Bible study in which the goal is not to master the text, but to have the text master you.
- Method: Read a scripture passage with two questions in mind: (1) what is this text saying to me today? (2) what is this text asking of me today? *Lectio* also includes recording answers to these questions and acting on them.
- History: The practice, developed in monasteries from the work of the second century theologian Origen, involves four steps: *lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio*

Exercise: John 15:1-17

- *Lectio*: as we read the passage together, taking turns, direct your attention to the FEELINGS it engenders in you. Identify and note the feeling or feelings most interesting to you. Listen as the passage is read a second time with your attention directed to IMAGINING yourself in the scene. Jesus speaks these words in the upper room, after he has washed his disciples' feet. Imagine that you are a disciple or an observer. Use all your senses to "flesh out" the story. What does the room look like? Who is in it? What do they look like? What sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and sensations (touches) can you identify? It may help to close your eyes while the story is read to aid your imagination. Identify and note observations that are most interesting to you.
- *Meditatio*: Read the passage again silently. Consider and record your answers to the following questions, which will help you think about the IDEAS in this passage: (1) Why do you think this passage was written and included in Scripture? (2) What does it tell us about God, about human beings, and about our relationship with God? (3) Do you think there is any difference in what this passage had to say to the first hearers and what it has to say to us today? Why or why not?
- *Oratio*: Find a comfortable position, close your eyes and take a few deep breaths to prepare to PRAY over this passage. Empty your mind of other thoughts as you hear the passage read one more time. Try to focus your attention on God and listen. If an impression or thought comes to you, acknowledge it, then refocus your attention on God. If you find day-to-day thoughts intruding, gently

(Lectio Divina / Exercise: John 15:1-17, continued)

let them go, and focus again on the passage. You do not need to keep track of the time. When the leader calls you back from the time of prayer, open your eyes and stretch. Record any impressions or thoughts that emerged from your prayer. If no thought or impression came to you regarding the passage, simply record what thoughts and impressions did fill your prayer time.

- *Contemplatio*: With the passage in front of you, ask yourself and record your answers to the basic questions of *Lectio Divina* as you APPLY the message to your life today: (1) what is this passage saying to me today? (2) what is this passage asking of me today?

Group Discussion

- What was this experience like for you? What was most surprising?
- How do you believe *Lectio Divina* could be used in your daily life?
- How do you believe *Lectio Divina* could be used in the life of your church?
- What do you plan to do with any information or insights you have gained in this hour?

(Provided by the Spiritual Formation Resource Team)



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Guided Meditation for an Evening Prayer Service

Prepared by Lucinda Alwa, Spiritual Formation Resource Team

On a midweek evening, we have a prayer service based on “An Order for Evening Praise and Prayer” in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (574–6). The Scripture readings for this service consist of the lectionary passages for the next Sunday. Participants volunteer to read the passages aloud, usually remaining in their seats. They are encouraged to engage in a form of *lectio divina*, listening in the presence of the Spirit for words or verses that touch them with special power (see *Lectio Divina* instructions for more details on this practice). The pastor is seated, facing the people.

Guided Meditation

Guided meditation follows the Scripture reading. At the beginning of this time, I invite the people to close their eyes and get settled in their seat, with feet placed evenly on the floor, spines straight but not rigid, and hands relaxed, perhaps placed gently on the thighs. We then breathe deeply for several minutes and let ourselves come into the silence. This “coming into the silence” is important and intuitive. Its dual purpose is to come together as a group in the deep quiet of the sanctuary and to feel grounded within oneself through the meeting of body and spirit. I may suggest as we breathe to become aware of our bones, muscles, heart, lungs, cells, and so on—to be fully present in our bodies as we immerse ourselves in prayer. This time allows us to feel the Holy Spirit leading us into the guided meditation.

In preparation before the service, I have usually identified in the readings a theme or image on which I want to focus (not a sermon). The reading at the opening of the service often points to a particular starting point for the meditation. For instance, with the gospel reading John 13:31-35, we began by visualizing the scene of Jesus at the last supper, just after Judas has gone out.

The leader might say, “Think of a personal experience or time in your life that caused you such pain that you were forever changed.” A space of silence followed. “Go to the buried place that has kept this pain bound up in you. Allow yourself to meet this pain. Allow yourself to become this pain again.” Silence. “This is Jesus’ pain, the night he was betrayed.” Silence. “Breathe through this pain and see Jesus talking to his disciples. Hear him say ‘*Little children, I am with you only a little while longer.*’ Feel the grief of the disciples.” Silence. “As you breathe, become aware of the light in this room of the last supper. The light of a lamp on the table. The radiance coming from Jesus. Allow this radiance to meet your pain, to fill you, to breathe through you.” Silence. “Hear Jesus say, ‘*Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.*’ See the light of this glory. Feel the heat—the weight of this glory that joins Jesus with God. Allow this glory to radiate through you, burning through your pain. Feel this glory joining you with Jesus and with God.” Silence.

(Guided Meditation for an Evening Prayer Service / Guided Meditation, continued)

I usually refer in some way to other readings of the evening; for instance, I might end with the words from Revelation 21:5: "And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'" After more silence, "Amen." At this point, participants open their eyes when they feel ready. We then have a time of sharing and prayer concerns. Sometimes we will discuss responses to the meditation, but not always. We move into the evening prayer and petitions, followed by the Lord's Prayer. After a hymn and blessing, we pass the peace of Christ and part for the evening.

Sample Bulletin: A Service of Evening Praise and Prayer

PROCLAMATION OF THE LIGHT and lighting of candles

Light and peace in Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God.

**I call upon you, O Lord: come quickly to me; give ear to my voice
when I call to you. Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,
and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice. (Psalm 141:1-2)**

EVENING SONG "Now Praise the Hidden God of Love" #2027

PRAYER FOR THE WORLD AND ITS PEOPLES

O God,

**You are the hope of all the ends of the earth,
the God of the spirits of all flesh.**

**Hear our humble intercession for all races and families on earth,
that you will turn all hearts to yourself.**

**Remove from our minds hatred, prejudice, and contempt
for those who are not of our own race or color, class or creed,
that, departing from everything that estranges and divides,
we may by you be brought into unity of spirit, in the bond of peace. Amen.**

(Church of Scotland, 20th cent. UM BOW #526)

PSALTER Psalm 148 #861-862, Read Response

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Acts 11:1-18 (Pew Bible NT 130)

Revelation 21:1-6 (Pew Bible NT 259)

John 13:31-35 (Pew Bible NT 108)

REFLECTION AND MEDITATION

EVENING PRAYER AND LORD'S PRAYER

SONG OF PARTING "How Lovely, Lord, How Lovely" #2042

BLESSING

May the grace of Jesus Christ enfold us.

Let us go in peace.

Thanks be to God.

**THE PEACE*

(Provided by the Spiritual Formation Resource Team)

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Prayer and the Arts

Prepared by Amy Anderson, Spiritual Formation Resource Team

Supplies and Preparation

- Meditative music: traditional, contemporary, or chant
- Music media and digital or CD player
- Rugs to sit on in center circle
- Provide lyrics of “Amazing Grace”
- Three large canvases, set up in a triangular pattern in the room
- Brushes, paint, chalk, ink, markers, colored pencils
- Tarps to protect the floor under the canvases
- Paper towels, wash basins, water, soap (consider multiples needed for foot- or hand-washing)

Instructions

- Open with prayer: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20)
- Gather in circle, on rugs
- Begin in silence, then engage in simple chanting or other meditative music
- Sing twice through the first verse of “Amazing Grace” together
 - Listening to the music, be in conversation with God, palms open, facing up, eyes closed: acknowledge the weight on your heart and claim your sin.
 - Continue to listen and be in conversation with God: release your burdens and sin; give them to God.
 - As the music continues, so does your conversation with God: open your heart and accept God’s grace and love for you.
- Invite participants to go to the three large canvases in groups
- As moved, express *grace* on the canvases, using the various media provided
- Return to “rug circle” for meditation and sharing
- Together, sing verse two of “Amazing Grace” through twice.
- Search out a companion to engage in foot- or hand-washing

(Provided by the Spiritual Formation Resource Team)

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Guidelines for a Spiritual Conversation

Prepared by the Spiritual Formation Resource Team

- Allow at least an hour for the conversation, more for some people. The amount of time is less important than creating a safe and fruitful means for people to share their spirituality.
- It is important to take time to allow the Spirit to be present and to guide the direction of the conversation. This is why beginning with prayer and a Scripture passage of your choice is suggested.
- Related to this is the importance of creating a climate of hospitality and openness. Lighting a candle as part of the prayer time would be helpful.
- Listening and asking open-ended questions are vital. Avoid making evaluative comments. Ask follow-up questions aimed at inviting the person to uncover and share more about his or her experiences.
- Seek to let the Spirit create in you love, appreciation, interest in, and respect for the person who is willing to do this interview.
- Conclude with silence and a prayer of thanksgiving for the work of the Spirit and your time together.
- Record notes and ideas to share with the team after the conversation. During the conversation, focus on active listening.

Conversation Questions

Begin with a time of prayer and psalm reading (e.g., selected verses from Psalm 139, Romans 8:26, or a Scripture passage of your choosing).

1. What drew you here to have this conversation?
2. What have been some major turning points in your life? For instance, a move, a new job, loss of a job, marriage, the birth of a baby, a divorce, a period of family struggle, the death of a loved one, other.
3. Did you experience God's presence or love at any of these times?
4. Have you had other times when you experienced God's presence and love or felt especially close to God? For instance: in prayer and meditation, in worship, studying Scripture, participating in a small group, listening to music, reading literature, encountering art, being in nature, an important person in your life, other. Please share an example or examples.
5. What do you regularly do that brings you into God's presence and deepens your relationship with God?
6. Do you feel a hunger to grow closer to God? Are you looking for ways your relationship with God could grow? What help and guidance would you like your local church or the conference to offer? For instance: Bible study, prayer and meditation, spiritual direction, books on spirituality, spiritual support group, spiritual friend, dream interpretation, study of other religions, retreats, discovery of Spiritual Gifts.