



Hungryhearts

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Discernment

Listen with the
Ear of Your Heart

Editor's Reflections

Listen.

So begins Benedict's *Rule*, written some 1500 years ago, and still this word serves us in good stead. Listen for the words, yes, but also for what is beneath the words. Listen through your faith, and through your experience. Listen for your hopes and dreams, your pain and sorrow, and for those with whom you speak. In a word, listen, but not for pressures of sound and vibration, but with the ear of your heart. In a word, *discern*.

Our church is not alone in understanding discernment as a core gift of the Spirit. Nor are we the only denomination or faith tradition unsure of what discernment means, and might mean for us, in a culture where the word is used freely, loosely, and often without consequence.

Perhaps we can learn from the ancient practice of *lectio divina*, or sacred reading. For too long it has been taught simply as read Scripture, reflect on it, respond in prayer, and rest in God. But since the twelfth century, and subsequently built upon by John Wesley, an all-important fifth step has been lifted up, but not often enough. Whether emphasizing the incarnation (*incarnatio*) or works (*operatio*), it has been understood that we must act on the word and bring it to life, through the grace of Jesus Christ who has given us life. We must be "doers of the word, and not merely hearers..." (James 1:22).

Discernment is no different. It may be that we are to slowly "read" Scripture, ourselves, others, or a situation, to prayerfully consider, and patiently wait. But out of this will emerge something on which we must act just as we are acted upon, not with catchy slogans or the adoption of new corporate models, but with faith, hope, and love.

Listen, for God's Word to you. Listen, with the ear of your heart.

Peace,

Steve

Spiritual Formation Dinner Wednesday, June 19, 2002

Join us from 6-7:30 p.m. at the Hyatt Regency Hotel to hear Professor Bonnie Thurston of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary speak on *The Early Church Finds Its Way: Discernment in the Acts of the Apostles*. The author of several books, including *To Everything a Season: A Spirituality of Time* (1999), Dr. Thurston will explore biblical models of discernment. The cost for the dinner is \$28. Tickets will be available in the Registration Booth outside the Plenary Hall.

CORRECTION: The account number for supporting the **Spiritual Formation Leadership Network** was given incorrectly in our last issue. It should have read **ECO Project #048180 (Spiritual Formation Leadership Network)**. The number for *Hungryhearts*, ECO Project #51217, was correct. Checks to either Extra Commitment Opportunity should be made out to "Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)" with the ECO project number and name on the memo line. Mail to: Central Receiving Service, Section 300, Louisville KY 40289. We apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused.

Communal Discernment: Choosing with God in Community

by Steven Wirth

We as Christians seek to grow closer in relationship with God. A challenge in doing this is how to make our life choices better reflect God's values. In the early stages of our spiritual lives this may seem a rather simple and clear-cut practice. As individuals, seeking to do good and avoid evil can carry us a long way. For some people this simple focus remains profound and spiritually rich. Perhaps the circumstances of their lives are such that they face few complex questions.

The rest of us find ourselves confronted with challenging decisions that don't lend themselves easily to simple solutions. This is particularly true when we attempt to live our community and organizational lives mindful of God's values. In relationships as close as that between spouses or as complex as global organizations, the challenge of making decisions and acting in ways consistent with the Spirit requires of us a mature spirit and willing heart.

Yet if a prayerful disposition and a willing heart were adequate to the task of choosing with God's values, one would expect to see a history of far less waywardness in our Christian tradition. The bloody and horrid history of wars, religious persecution, congregational fractures from the local to the universal church were all perpetrated to a large degree by Christians who confidently believed that "God is on our side!" or "We must fight for the Truth!" And even today, when we read the interchanges within denominations as diverse as Southern Baptists, Roman Catholics, Amish, and Presbyterians we notice that regardless of specific issues the pattern of "fighting for the Truth" to the death of the congregation continues.

What is especially interesting about this pattern of divisiveness is that even within groups that are seemingly homogeneous the same patterns tend to play out. We would expect this where the values are widely divergent, say between feminists and traditionalists, but it regularly occurs in settings where the differences to the outside observer are so miniscule as to be beyond understanding. Members of Bible-believing storefront churches can and do regularly split with fury over apparently small changes in the order of service or who the music minister is, with no doctrinal or cultural "truths" at issue.

Granted one answer is that this all results from our sinful human nature. And any casual reader of Christian history recognizes that those with the "purest and most righteous" piety often acted with the greatest fury and inhumanity to others. And although the disparity between the "ends" we claim (doing God's will) and the "means" we use (in some cases torturing and slaughtering whole populations) appear obvious to us in hindsight, we nonetheless know the warrior fury that can get touched in us over those "truths" and issues you and I care passionately about.

I have wrestled with this state of affairs for over 15 years in my work assisting individuals and communities seek God in their organizational, family, and personal lives. As a Christian seeking to follow God in my own life, I know personally the challenges, pain and profound hope that faithful exploration of these questions can make possible. The need to do so is compelling.

The fractures in our world are large, real, and affect every one of us. The pain they create in all of our lives is immeasurable, and each of God's children suffers the results of our inability to resolve our misunderstandings more effectively.



Steven Wirth is a Partner with The Yardley Group, Inc. As a spiritual director, group process consultant, and healthcare executive, he has worked with diverse corporate, political, and denominational leaders and groups to bring effectiveness and integrity to their work. He facilitates using the practices of Contemplative Dialogue, and trains others to care for the spirit of organizations and communities. Mr. Wirth can be reached at www.theyardleygroup.com

Too many good and faithful Christians despair of the possibility of the Spirit bringing compassion and real unity to the lives of our organizations. How many of us in our heart of hearts trust that God is able to care for the soul of the individual and the spirit of the organization? Honestly? And yet it doesn't have to be this way! For surely God's desire is something richer than the divisive patterns we know too well.

I have witnessed leaders and communities finding common ground despite long-term conflict and apparently differing interests. I have experienced real trust being built in groups where it had not existed before. God's spirit is far more ingenious and effective than our experiences of human community lead us to believe. The possibilities for change are neither magical nor overnight, but they are real and possible.

Drawing on the wisdom of our spiritual traditions and combining this with the skills and practices of contemporary learning organizations allows our communities to draw on a common spirit that is rooted in neither a false peace nor the rigid dominance of a particular viewpoint. Community members describe being able to be their best selves and to work respectfully with those whose values and beliefs are different. They also speak of doing so with a deep sense of integrity to their own highest values and beliefs.

Given the limits of this space, I will attempt in brief fashion to point you toward some immediately useful tools and means of awareness. The necessary starting point is contemplative awareness. At its simplest, contemplation is the natural human ability to "take a long, loving look at the real." Yet while it sounds simple, it is a quality of awareness that we do not recognize or value highly in the busy culture of the United States. Our awareness tends to remain in familiar patterns of looking at experience that lull us into a life of always reacting. Like fish in water, we are surrounded and invisibly carried by our mental theories and patterns of noticing, often without recognizing their presence and power. As long as they remain outside our awareness, we are their prisoner. Contemplative noticing creates space

within us and a quality of openness that allows us to see with new eyes what's "real." Like the blind man in Mark 8:22-26, our vision slowly clears and what looked like "trees walking" becomes recognizable as "people."

For concrete examples of tools that help us notice more of what's real in our organizational lives, begin with Barry Johnson's "Polarity Management."¹ The power of this tool lies in its recognition that we are oriented toward "fixing and solving problems," but that some situations we face are dynamic and teeter between related, but very different, values. Think of breathing for a moment. It's a process that necessarily involves both inhaling and exhaling. To focus on inhaling as "the solution" or "the goal" would be an impossible state to

maintain. Yet we often treat the tension between "polar values" (for example, tradition and change) as problems that will be solved by holding on to one value or the other in isolation. What polarity management recognizes is that there are seeds of truth in each position that escape our instinctive "right/

wrong" and "black/white" dualistic thinking. Moving beyond "I'm right - you're wrong," to thoughtful conversations about what qualities of both positions are beneficial allows us to broaden the responses available to our organizations. It gives us a productive way to move beyond the endless debates and parliamentary fights that dog our governing bodies.

A second tool with immense power is Chris Argyris' "Ladders of Inference."³ The ladder of inference (assumption) refers to the way our brains process experience. Starting with simple sensory data the human mind quickly adds interpretations, analysis, and arrives at abstract judgments and decisions in the blink of an eye. The problem is that this happens so quickly we don't recognize it ourselves. When two of us witness a similar event, perhaps as simple as a comment at a meeting, we each assign meanings and interpretations and arrive at "the truth" of "what just happened." One witness interprets the comment as "angry and aggressive" while another may be sure it was "nothing at all." Each is convinced of the rightness of their position

Discernment... always aims at enhancing one's participation in the work of God; it is always undertaken for the glory of God and the healing of the world.

Frank Rogers, Jr. ²

because “I heard it with my own two ears!”

What the ladder of inference reveals are the subtle yet dramatic steps we take in moving from concrete experience to abstract interpretation. And while we spend vast amounts of time debating abstractions with one another, we miss the simpler places where our assumptions about the importance and meaning of particular pieces of the experience create widely divergent interpretations. By noticing the steps we take and openly talking about these with one another, we are often able to gain understanding that will never happen at the abstract level of thought. The discipline of revealing our assumptions and “thinking” steps with those around us helps to clarify potential differences of interpretation long before they get to the stage of conflict.”⁴

You may be wondering why contemplative noticing and practical skills are given so much space in an article entitled, “Communal Discernment: Choosing with God in Community.” If we are to recognize the Spirit’s signs and movement in the lives of our organizations, we must first be able and open to noticing them. The Spirit’s presence often reveals itself in the moments in which each person chooses the way in which they will be present to the meeting and the other participants. Or when a group listens and speaks compassionately about its differences. It is in the moments of conscious choice that the Spirit can work with and through our freedom to create new possibilities. But what values should guide these choices?

In my work I find that people from all religions will agree that God is the source of all truth. In Christian scripture, Jesus doesn’t say, “I tell the truth.” But rather “I AM the Truth.” If we accept Jesus at his word, then when we see the truth being told with compassion are we not seeing God’s Spirit alive in our midst? And doesn’t it change my perspective when I recognize that “my opponent,” or simply “They,” may in fact be attempting to witness to the truth as they have experienced it? This is not

to say that all viewpoints or expressions are equal. This is not relativism. It is saying that if I listen with compassion to the deepest value being expressed by another person I will glimpse “the living Truth” making its presence known in his or her life.

God will not be manipulated. The awareness and process with which we approach our community lives often dictates the outcomes long before meetings begin. Hanging a prayer on the beginning or end of a meeting is not enough to change what happens within it. A verbally or procedurally violent process will not produce an outcome reflecting God’s values. A sure sign of the lack of necessary contemplative awareness is the use of “We/They”

language. Approaching a meeting with the goal (however well-intended) of “winning” or dominating the “opposition” may be acceptable culturally, but will not produce life-giving outcomes.

We are naturally pulled to meet force with force, and to respond to opposition by returning opposition. In fractured pre-Civil War America, *Roberts’ Rules of Order* was designed to ensure order (a fair verbal fight) that could avoid physical violence. Yet we can now add to that powerful ways

to draw more deeply on the human spirit and thereby access the deep common ground that is its source. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. And hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.” He was speaking about how we can bring about change in communities. Change that gives life, builds lasting connections, and reflects God’s dream for all people.

Collectively I refer to this practice as Contemplative Dialogue. It provides groups and their members with a greater ability to engage and overcome the challenges they collectively face, and to do so with integrity and compassion. It creates ways of drawing on what is best and most essential in each of us, and creates trustworthy ways to bring that into the work of our organizations and individual

We must be perfectly open and simple, without prejudice and without artificial theories about ourselves. We must learn to speak according to our own inner truth, as far as we can perceive it. We must learn to say what we really mean in the depths of our souls, not what we think we are expected to say, not what somebody else has just said. And we must be prepared to take responsibility for our desires, and accept the consequences.

Thomas Merton⁵

lives.

We can develop the practices of contemplative noticing, speaking together for common understanding, and recognizing the signs of Spirit's presence in our midst. In doing so we create the possibility of our organizations becoming communities through which God may touch and heal our fractured human family and world. ☺

¹See www.polaritymanagement.com.

²Frank Rogers, Jr. "Discernment." *Practicing Our Faith*. Ed. Dorothy C. Bass. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997: 107.

³See *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization*. Eds. Peter M. Senge, et al. NY: Currency/Doubleday, 1994.

⁴See *On Dialogue*. Eds. David Bohm and Lee Nichol. NY: Routledge, 1996.

⁵Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*. Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1960: 37.

Suggested Reading

William A. Barry, *Finding God in All Things*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1991.

Sarah A. Butler, "Lectio Divina as a Tool for Discernment." *The Divine Indwelling: Centering Prayer and its Development*. Ed. Thomas Keating. NY: Lantern Books, 2001.

Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward. *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991.

Suzanne G. Farnham, Stephanie A. Hull, and R. Taylor McLean. *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999:1

Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, Matthew Linn, *Sleeping with Bread*. NY: Paulist Press, 1995.

Pierre Wolff, *Discernment: The Art of Choosing Well*. Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 1993.

Additional volumes on discernment are listed on our website, www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation, under **Books/Resources**.

Spiritual formation is the activity of the Holy Spirit which molds our lives into the likeness of Jesus Christ. This likeness is one of deep intimacy with God and genuine compassion for all of creation. The Spirit works not only in the lives of individuals but also in the church, shaping it into the Body of Christ. We cooperate with this work of the Spirit through certain practices that make us more open and responsive to the Spirit's touch, disciplines such as sabbath keeping, works of compassion and justice, discernment, worship, hospitality, spiritual friendships, and contemplative silence.

Office of Spiritual Formation, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

DISCERNMENT 101

What is Discernment?

First, what discernment is *not*: it is not ordinary decision making. Determining where to have lunch, which charities to support, and the “right” shade of blue for a particular room, are all decisions that can and should be made through common sense and good judgment.

There are other choices, however, that are far more complex and murky, and upon which more hangs in the balance. According to Kris Haig, Coordinator for the Office of Spiritual Formation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), such decisions include:

[w]hether to continue in an unsatisfying job? Whether to embark upon a new career in midlife? Whether to marry someone or to separate? Whether to accept a nomination to church office or turn it down? And then there are decisions we make in groups: who to call to serve as our pastor, whether to begin a new program of community ministry, whether to make a significant change in our denomination’s *Book of Order*.

“Decisions like these,” Haig continues, “do not present a clear and obvious choice. In situations like these, we cannot think our way to the good choice; we have to pray our way. For these choices, the spiritual tradition provides the process of discernment.”* The original meaning of the word in Latin is quite telling: *discernere* is “to sift apart,” as in sifting wheat to remove the chaff.



What are the Origins of Discernment?

This notion of heeding God’s direction is a biblical one, the “discernment of spirits” being identified as a gift of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:10, and the concept itself raised in several other passages. But discernment as a structured process is associated most closely with Ignatius of Loyola, a sixteenth century Roman Catholic contemporary of John Calvin. Ignatius was the youngest son of a wealthy Spanish family who was seriously wounded in battle. During his long recuperation he kept himself occupied in two fashions. First, he read books on chivalry, imagining in great detail heroic acts and the woman for whom he would perform them; these thoughts tended to energize him. At the same time, however, he spent a lot of time reading the Bible and a book on the lives of the saints. This was more of a struggle for him. But over time he realized that while he had an initial burst of energy from reading and imagining his chivalry, this tended to leave him feeling empty. Conversely, the Bible and lives of saints, although not immediately satisfying, produced in him joy, peace, and vigor. It was from this realization that Ignatius developed a system of making choices based on the movement of the Spirit, a system we now call “discernment.”*

Spiritual Consolations and Desolations

Of the variety of terms used in discussing discernment, among the most misunderstood are the spiritual “consolations” and “desolations.” While **spiritual consolations** can be found in a wide array of life experiences, most commonly they are found in the sense of “appreciation, of compassion, of kindness, and of hope.”[†] It is not the same as feeling happy, but it is a sense of being at peace, trusting in the presence of God.

Spiritual desolations are the reverse, full of confusion and anxiety rather than love for God or neighbor. Perhaps it is a matter of lethargy or activity simply for the sake of keeping busy. This is not the same as feeling sad, but it is a time without love or appreciation for all that surrounds us, when kindness is difficult and hope is fleeting. Such desolation “prevents us from seeing reality in its fullest context and from making balanced value judgments.”[†]

*Kris Haig, “Discernment: The Art of Choosing Life.” Sermon. February 13, 2000.

†Tad Dunne, *Spiritual Exercises for Today*. Harper San Francisco, 1991: 162-163.

Discernment: The Art of Finding God’s Call in Daily Life[®]

Before each of the “moments” in the discernment process, take the opportunity to let the silence deepen around you. Be mindful that this is a venture between you and God, and that this process is not to be entered into hastily; to honestly discern you must be prepared to take as much time as is needed.

- 1. Frame the discernment question.** Be as concise as you can. If possible, formulate your issue into a question that can be answered “yes” or “no.” Write out the decision you wish to discern, and bring the issue and your process thus far to God. Attend to any sense that arises in you.
- 2. Approaching a decision through rational processes.** Consider your potential decision. List as many reasons as possible for your potential decision (pros), then in a second column, list as many reasons as you can against moving in that direction (cons). Reflect on each list, beginning with the cons. Take time to write out your feelings about the decision now that you have created these lists. Weigh the lists carefully and frame a tentative decision. Be attentive to the connection of your tentative decision to your desire to follow God.
- 3. Approaching a decision through intuition.** Allow your consciousness to be opened. As images arise, write them down. Of these images, does one seem to “capture” the decision you face better than others? Of these, which one(s) have a “rightness,” “freshness,” “creativity,” or “energy”? Take time to journal and pray about what emerges from this image and the potential options it suggests.
- 4. Approaching a decision through imagination.** With your attention focused, enter into your imagination with one or two of the reflections from your last reflection period, or visualize one option to which your intuition points. Imagine taking a different path. Consider: (1) which path flowed most freely, (2) was most exciting, (3) seemed most right? Which connects most to your personal history?
- 5. Approaching a decision through religious affections.** Examine your decision for “consolation” and “desolation” (see above). Make a tentative decision based on this experience, prepared to test it over time.
- 6. Testing a discernment decision.** Over time, a well-discerned decision remains firm. Consider the following: does the decision continue to “sit well”? Does the consolation remain? Do other fruits of the Spirit emerge (Galatians 5:22)? Do others who know you well confirm it? Is it in accord with the Bible? Does it strengthen other personal commitments? Remember, no one test is enough; look at the whole picture.

Elizabeth Liebert is Professor of Spiritual Life at San Francisco Theological Seminary, where she has been the Director of the Program in Christian Spirituality. She previously appeared in the Spring 2002 edition of Hungryhearts. This is reprinted with permission. Those who wish to use this material should contact Dr. Liebert at eliebert@sfts.edu

Listen with the Ear of Our Heart

by Irene M. Turner

It was a question of major importance: a career change. I had been wrestling with the desire to find a job that would reenergize me in a creative way, when — out of the blue — a co-worker called and announced, “I have found the perfect job for you!” A golden opportunity had opened for me. “What now?” I asked myself. I was overcome by that “happy/scared, can-this-really-be-true, am-I-qualified, is-this-the-right-move” feeling. A career change is one of those situations that make one yearn for discernment.

Discernment is a current buzzword in ecclesiastical circles. While we tend to use the term *discernment* freely, when we speak of *spiritual* discernment, we refer to “a prayerful, informed, intentional effort to distinguish God’s voice from other voices that influence us.”* The goal is to find the mind of Christ, not easy answers. Spiritual discernment is *not* problem solving but a mode of prayer that involves opening our entire selves — body, mind, and soul — to God’s Spirit. It calls for deep listening.

Opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit takes discipline and practice. It requires silence. Job’s friend Eliphaz said to him, “A word was brought to me stealthily, my ear received the whisper of it... a spirit glided past my face... a form was before my eyes; there was silence, *then* I heard a voice” (Job 4:12ff).

I have learned that it is necessary to be intentional in becoming silent, to go to a place without distractions in order to find the silence within. True silence brings with it a stillness that washes over me as gently as a spring rain but holds me as firmly as the roots of a tree planted by streams of water. When I experience inner silence, then I can hear God.

God speaks to us in many ways: through music in hymn or melody that will not stop repeating itself; through art in images that reveal insights waiting to be seen; through Scripture, which tells not only God’s story but our own. Recently I was sitting quietly beside a small fishpond, trying to clear my mind, and pondering the question, “How can the relationship between my daughter and me have new meaning and greater depth at this time of our lives?” And God spoke to me — through art. All at once I could see, as vividly as if it were actually in front of me, Picasso’s painting *Mother and Child*. Recalling the sharp edges and intense colors found in Picasso’s cubism, I wondered about the soft, gentle lines and tones in this painting. I became profoundly aware of the strength of the mother’s love for her child and the strong sense of security the child experienced in the mother’s arms, and, at the same time, how much freedom seemed to exist between the two of them. The mother was not grasping the child tightly, nor was the child clinging to the mother, afraid of life and the adventure of growing. Reflecting upon the relationship between that mother and child helped me to move toward a new sense of my own relationship with my daughter. At that moment, I resolved to welcome an adult relationship with my daughter, work at open communications, and cultivate mutual trust and acceptance between us.

Seeking God through discernment is like tuning in, finding the right station, and listening. If I have a radio but it is not turned on, I hear nothing from it. If I turn it on but fail to tune in to a station, I hear static or a cacophony of gibberish. I must tune myself to God, set aside other thoughts and deeply listen.

St. Benedict urges us to “listen with the ear of our heart.” In the stillness of silence, as we set aside distracting thoughts, we can become deeply rooted in God, and begin to truly listen. When we are centered in God we are drawn into alignment with God and begin to feel the moving direction of the Spirit of God! This is the dawning of spiritual discernment.

Discernment may begin as a personal endeavor, but it cannot be practiced in isolation from community. The stillness, quietness, and attentiveness that are fundamental to spiritual discernment can begin to develop in private, but need to mature in relationship with others. When we join with others, the Christ within us encountering the Christ in them, we see our brothers and sisters anew and develop a mutual respect. Even those who do not speak aloud often add something important, not only through their facial expressions or bodily movements, but through the strength of their prayer. These folk support the whole community by

Irene M. Turner, Director of Operations of Listening Hearts Ministries, is a member of Brown Memorial Woodbrook Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, Maryland.

being in the presence of God so keenly that the power of that Presence encircles the entire group.

When God's people seek God's guidance in community, let down their defenses, open themselves to the Spirit, and wait attentively, God is active although it may not be obvious at the time. The message we hear from God through the voices of God's people may not be what we expected. The message that comes to a group of people gathered in prayer may be a surprise to everyone, for when we open ourselves to God, the Spirit sometimes carries us to an entirely new place.

As we learn to listen intently to what people express outwardly, to God within them, and to the quiet murmurings of our own hearts, we find ourselves drawn into an understanding of what true community means. There is ample room for the Spirit of God to move, so that unity of mind may come without debate and tireless efforts at persuasion. Consensus emerges naturally.

Deeper listening guided me in my decision regarding my career change. I found during this experience of transition, not the fear and frustration I had known in earlier life changes, but tranquility founded on the grace of God and the love of God's people. ☺

*Suzanne G. Farnham, Stephanie A. Hull, and R. Taylor McLean. *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999:1

Listening Hearts Ministries, a non-denominational, non-profit organization headquartered in Baltimore, is dedicated to enabling individuals and groups to discern God's call to them through prayerful listening, imaginative engagement with Scripture, and careful attention to signs of the Spirit.

Programs are based on two highly respected books written in Christian community, *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* and *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations*. These programs include retreats and workshops of various lengths as well as residential training weeks to prepare leaders from around the country to train others in Listening Hearts spiritual discernment.

Reaching into every section of the country and beyond, the work of Listening Hearts Ministries is having a profound impact on the lives of individuals, groups, church congregations and wider communities.

See <http://www.listeninghearts.ang-md.org/> for more information

Insites Practicing Our Faith

<http://www.practicingourfaith.org/>

In 1997 a book was written that set a new standard in addressing spiritual formation from a Protestant perspective, its fourteen chapters offering a breadth matched only by the depth of each individual piece. *Practicing Our Faith*, edited by Dorothy C. Bass, is a book well worth looking at, and it has spawned a website equally valuable. Easy to access and attractive in display, a significant contribution of this site is its review of the twelve practices detailed in the book. From discernment to sabbath-keeping, hospitality to music, these practices are provided in an easy-to-digest form, whether for individuals exploring on their own, or pastors seeking a straightforward introduction for their congregation.

Another dimension to this site, which will be of interest to many, is the emphasis on grants available through the Valparaiso Project. No mere passing reference, key information is provided, including relevant areas of study and recently awarded projects. In this time of great interest but uncertain parameters, concrete study as promoted by this site cannot be underestimated.

Practicing Our Faith: ☼☼☼☼☼

Scale: ☼☼☼☼☼ sheds a lot of light — ■ lights out

How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?

Romans 10:14

Starting a Spirituality Book Club

by Susan Baller-Shepard

Three years ago, my sister and I decided to start a “spirituality book club” at our local bookstore. After running a brief blurb in the newspaper, including a sample book list, we had the store order our first book, *Traveling Mercies* by Anne LaMott. When the bookstore called me and told me that they couldn’t keep the volume on the shelf, I knew there was a bigger hand in this.

That night, over sixty folks came to start a spirituality book club. We were overwhelmed, literally; there was barely enough seating between the shelves. That night, many participants repeatedly shared two things: they were “thirsty,” and they felt distant from or injured by their local place of worship. Consequently, the group agreed on ground rules for the book club: respect for others’ views even if you do not share them, and a willingness to explore a variety of ways of coming to God.

Since we started our number and membership have fluctuated, but a solid core of members ranging in age from 21 to 84 has held steady. Among the books we’ve read are *Everyday Simplicity: A Practical Guide to Spiritual Growth* by Robert J. Wicks; *How Good Do We Have to Be?* by Rabbi Harold Kushner; *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom; and *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence. There are a number of folks who do not attend the monthly gatherings but follow the book club on-line via our Internet discussion board. Some members of the group make meals at the local homeless shelter together once a month, while others have dinner together before the book club. One member writes,

The best thing about the book club is that we really enjoy the fellowship, being able to share with each other and learn from each other. We find that even from very different traditions, there are some core basic truths, insights and suggestions for living a positive life that we can all relate to. It is an environment where everyone’s input is valued, people can feel free to share anything, and everyone is included and respected, and this is the crucial part of what has made the book club so successful.

Another member offers this:

I do look forward to coming together with others to discuss the monthly book, but that is not the most important part of the club for me. The most vital lesson is the commitment to read a little each day, and to spend some time meditating and contemplating on what I have received. After thirty days, I find my thoughts, insights, and opinions crystallize as they have had time to marinate and incubate in my soul and spirit.

Our local bookstore advertises our club each month in their store publications, listing the book we are reading or special guest speaker. For our meetings they also provide space, chairs, and a display with the current month’s book and the one to follow. Often store shoppers will join us, either by standing by the bookshelves and listening, or by sitting down and joining in the discussion.

You can follow our progress, and join in our reading, by going to www.spiritualbookclub.com. There you will find our booklist, a link to send comments or suggested books, and other useful information.

Rev. Susan Baller-Shepard is a Presbyterian parish associate at St. Luke Union Church, Bloomington, IL



Give us a ...Word

In the early days of the church, pilgrims in search of wisdom would seek out desert mothers and fathers, often presenting themselves with the request, "Give us a word." Those with the gift of wisdom and insight may no longer tend to live in the wilderness, but their words speak to us still.

Prayers from the Reformed Tradition
In the Company of a Great Cloud of Witnesses
Compiled and Edited by Diane Karay Tripp
Louisville, KY: Witherspoon Press, 2001.

Diane Karay Tripp has done the church a great service in her compilation of *Prayers from the Reformed Tradition*. This unique prayer book spans the devotional life of Idelette Calvin (born in 1505, four years before John) to the contemporary Frederick Buechner. The sources of these prayers are as varied as their intention, the diaries, life stories, and liturgies giving birth to words of intercession, confession, and preparation for death.

But more than just a treasury of prayers — as valuable as that can be — Tripp has provided a devotional appropriate for individual and corporate use. In particular, the first part of the book is divided into a four-week sequence of morning and evening prayers, with a number of selections for each day. In her Introduction, she points to a number of formats one might use to pray through the book, either utilizing her monthly schedule or incorporating the prayers into one's own daily practice. It is exciting to imagine committee, session, or presbytery meetings that include this vast (and largely unknown) history to set a standard of prayer for the gathering — a wonderful complement to the *Book of Confessions*.

The breadth and width of this book is astounding, accentuated by the second half which is filled with prayers for occasional use. With inclusions of Communion prayers, liturgically appropriate words of grace, and those timely for life's journey, those who plan worship will find a willing companion to the *Book of Common Worship*. And it is a treat to find familiar, if unexpected, friends within these pages. For example, I did not know that a Presbyterian, Elizabeth Payson Prentiss (1818-1878), was responsible for the words to the hymn, "More Love to Thee, O Christ."

If there is a flaw to the book, it is only that indexing could be more substantial. A brief biography of contributors is provided, but knowing what their individual contributions to the volume are would be useful. Likewise, while the types of occasional prayers can be found in the table of contents, those in the devotional section can be found only by thumbing through the pages.

But these are organizational issues that are secondary to what is truly a valuable and necessary contribution to Reformed churches in their continuing liturgical and spiritual growth, and to anyone of any tradition seeking prayer faithful to Jesus Christ.

— Steve Shussett

Please note: the books reviewed in *Hungryhearts* are **not** available through the Office of Spiritual Formation.

Give us a ...Picture

David P. Young, *Prayer Photos*. Louisville, KY: Photos That Tell Stories, 2001.

David and Marc Muench, *The Words of Francis of Assisi: Canticle of the Earth*.
Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2002.

The Family Faith Journal: A Book of Memories. The Office of Stewardship,
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001.

“A long loving look at the real” is William McNamara’s definition of contemplation, and that is exactly what readers and watchers alike will get from two new volumes of photographs, each of which is worth well over a thousand words.

The first book, *Prayer Photos*, is a collection of photos juxtaposed with prayers and poems, written by David P. Young, photographer for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The variety of words and pictures Young offers is a challenge to any who see spirituality as disconnected from “the real world” and efforts at peace and justice.

The Words of Francis of Assisi: Canticle of the Earth is by the father-son team of David and Marc Muench. It takes the words from the well-known “Canticle of the Sun” by Francis of Assisi and sets them phrase by phrase into the context of stunning nature photography. The words take on new and powerful significance alongside striking visuals of mountain, cloud, tree, and water. Admittedly, the language used in this version of the Canticle can, on occasion, be a stumbling block, but on the whole this collection breathes new life into this wonderful prayer of praise.

Both of these books are perfect for devotional use, wonderful ways to learn the discipline of taking a long, loving look at the real. There are also real possibilities for use in ministering to children, whether in children’s sermons or Christian education.

A third new volume, *The Family Faith Journal*, offers a different way to connect the visual and the spiritual. In celebration of the church’s emphasis on children, the Office of Stewardship has developed a “storytelling scrapbook” intended to share memories through photographs, words, and mementos. But more than just a photo album, those using this book are guided by topics and questions to address their life of faith, from birth family and church family, to what it was like to be a child, and and what it is like to be a child of God. Questions range from birth and baptism to death and endings, and everything in between. This is the kind of book one might buy to fill out and give as a gift to children or grandchildren, or to give as a blank book for those same descendants to prepare for future generations.

— Steve Shussett

Give us a word. Let us know what you are reading. What books have really spoken to you, and which texts have changed you? Send your thoughts and comments to Steve Shussett at SShussett@ctr.pcusa.org

On the Horizon

The glory, promise, and challenge of God can be hard to find, small as a mustard seed or hidden like the pearl of great price. But God's revelation can also be as apparent as Miriam's dance at the edge of the Red Sea (Exodus 15:20-21), the moon and the stars (Psalm 8:3), the rainbow over new creation (Genesis 9:13-17), or the cross itself.

In the next few months there will be a new, regular feature of our website's homepage, "In Plain Sight." Visitors turning to www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation will be invited to spend some quiet prayerful time with a piece of visual art, perhaps a photograph, painting, or sculpture. The prayers and poems evoked can then be sent to the *Hungryhearts* site, available to other viewers on an accompanying page.

To get a taste of what you will see ...

In Plain Sight



Photograph by David P. Young

Take your time with this picture, and with "energy, intelligence, imagination, and love," allow a prayer to be evoked within you. You are invited to share your reflections on this piece for the next issue of Hungryhearts by sending them to sshusset@ctr.pcusa.org. Future opportunities to share what was "in plain sight" for you will be available on our website.

Companions on the Inner Way Conference

For all who are called both to the journey inward and the journey outward
Spirituality of the World's Great Living Religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam & Christianity
August 18-23, 2002. Zephyr Point Presbyterian Conference Center, Zephyr Point, NV (Lake Tahoe)
415-258-6583 or apope@sfts.edu

As never before, we are aware of neighbors near and far who practice a religion other than our own. In an ever-smaller world, understanding is crucial; to understand is to appreciate. What can we as Christians learn from the spirituality of other religions? Each day will include lecture and dialogue with Howard Rice, afternoon worship with Communion, and evening prayer. Opportunities for communing with God through nature and art, contemplating spiritual readings, and times of silence and contemplation will also be available.

Go to www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation and use the **calendar** link for our complete listing of events around the country. Send information to [SShusset@ctr.pcusa.org](mailto:sshusset@ctr.pcusa.org). to get your events posted. Include a brief description of the event, along with where it is to be held and how to get more details.

Readers/Writers

So enjoyed the current issue of *Hungryhearts*. I re-lived a lot of those memories as I read the timeline. I am a spiritual director (class of 2001, San Francisco Theological Seminary) living in Fort Worth, TX, Grace Presbytery (a bit of “desert space” where spiritual directors are concerned...). However, my church’s staff at First Presbyterian is very supportive and encouraging. I share with you two of the events I’ve led — with enthusiastic participants.

During Advent last year, I led six sessions on contemplative prayer: “What is Contemplative Prayer?” “What are the Impediments?” “Breath Prayer,” “The Jesus Prayer,” “Praying with Icons,” “Centering Prayer,” and “The Labyrinth,” for which we used our own chapel pews — a great suggestion from *Hungryhearts* several years ago. Our time together was so very fruitful, and none of us will go into the chapel again without remembering our “Advent walk.”

The second event occurred during Lent 2002. In “Journeying to Jerusalem” participants could experience three forms of prayer: Scripture (*lectio*), art/music, and labyrinth (body prayer). A three-hour silent retreat on Good Friday culminated with once again using the chapel as a labyrinth, walking in solidarity with our Lord.

Martha Brooks

I have been centering for four years, and the practice has transformed my life. I am looking for a group that includes centering prayer or other forms of contemplative prayer, combined with a small-group emphasis on something like social justice or simple living, since such active ministries flow naturally from practice of contemplative prayer.

Rosalie Bush-Ryall

I practice a form of contemplative prayer in which, simply described, I listen behind the thoughts, feelings, and words in my mind to the part of me that is connected to God, centering myself in that relationship. This can take many forms. Usually I begin with silence as I become aware of that ever-present connection to God. I spend time in those moments just being, actively resting, knowing I am loved, and listening for the peaceful strength given in that embrace. Most often, this leads to turning attention to the thoughts, feelings, and words floating through my consciousness and my body. Sometimes it is similar to *lectio divina*.

I never “studied” this process, though I occasionally ran across it in literature through high school and college. It has just come naturally to me. In church when we pray silently or verbally, I still find this process at work. And I greet an old friend, an intimate, when resting in the Presence of God. It has helped me follow the call to rest in God’s arms knowing that others, too, have prayed this way for centuries - and still do.

Deborah Matthews, Seminary Student at San Francisco Theological Seminary

Let us know your thoughts. Send your readings/writings to **Steve Shussett** at SShusset@ctr.pcusa.org, or by surface mail to him at the **Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville KY 40202-1396**.

**Watch for our new and improved website, including “In Plain Sight.”
Check us out at www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation**



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Discernment
Listen with the
Ear of Your Heart

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