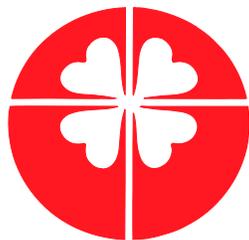


MANUAL *for*
Listening Hearts
MINISTRY TEAMS



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OVERVIEW: DISCOVERING A NEW DIMENSION

As the core of the Listening Hearts Program, discernment training teaches the fundamental principles of spiritual discernment and the practical aspects of implementing those principles. But more significantly, it offers a setting where participants can experience the practice of discernment firsthand. Frequently, this experience introduces a new dimension into their relationship with God. Often those who have been trained find themselves interacting with people at home and at work in new and satisfying ways. To the extent that the training opens up the power of God in their daily lives, they transmit that energy to the life of the church. They become emissaries who carry the spirit of discernment into the parish. The quality of life within a congregation tends to deepen as more of its members are trained in discernment.

Everyone who has been trained is invited to be part of a discernment ministry team, a group that provides opportunities for the faith community to learn about spiritual discernment and offers discernment groups for persons seeking God's guidance around specific problems and issues. A discernment ministry team is a small group of people with a big job. Collectively, they need to keep track of many threads and numerous details.

This manual capsulizes important aspects of the program. It is designed to be used in conjunction with the Listening Hearts series of books, Listening Hearts brochures and book fliers, and the Listening Hearts' *Handbook for Training Discernment Ministry Teams*. Each person actively involved in discernment ministry can be given a copy of this manual for ready reference.

DISCERNMENT TRAINING

READING AND RETREATS

The training begins with the required reading and the two retreats described in the Listening Hearts' *Handbook for Training Discernment Ministry Teams*. Reading and retreats make good partners for discernment training. The reading gives a comprehensive overview of the theology and practice of spiritual discernment through the centuries of Christian history. The training retreats, on the other hand, provide experience in listening prayerfully, engaging the imagination, and meditating on Scripture. Periods of solitude and of community weave together as retreatants first take time to consider the implications of their own baptisms and then to step out of the limitations of linear time for a while. The retreats and reading combine to feed the whole person, often helping participants to relate to God in new ways that they can carry into their personal and corporate lives.

PRACTICUM WORKSHOPS

Before launching into the practicum discernment groups, participants prepare in several workshop sessions: (1) They go through appendices 1 and 2 of the 20th Anniversary Edition of *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* item by item with time for questions, comments, and discussion; (2) they review the duties of a discernment group, the focus person, the convener, and the discerners as outlined in this manual; and (3) members of the training class, after reading chapter 6 of *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations* (“Spiritual Consensus: A Way of Coming Together in Christ”), discuss spiritual consensus, especially as it relates to a discernment group.

After completing the required number of practicum discernment sessions, a final workshop session provides an opportunity for the trainees to share reflections on the training experience, pull together learnings, raise questions, fill out the “Practicum Group Final Evaluation” forms, and determine if further practicum sessions are desirable. Sometimes a festive meal is planned to cap off this event.

PRACTICUM DISCERNMENT SESSIONS

Practicum discernment sessions provide an opportunity for Members of the training class to gather in discernment groups to practice with each other, supervised by a mentor. To complete the training, each candidate must participate in at least five supervised discernment sessions, taking a minimum of one turn as a focus person, one as a convener, and one as an observer.

Each practicum session is real and not merely practice. The focus person's issue should not be contrived for the occasion. It is important to pray in preparation for each discernment session; then follow the guidelines provided in the appendices of *Listening Hearts, 20th Anniversary Edition*.

Observers receive the focus person write-up, they pray in preparation for the session, and fill in feedback forms at the end of the session. During the session, they sit inconspicuously outside of the circle, pray constantly, and listen intently. Observers often notice things when they are observing that they do not see when they are serving in a group.

After everyone in the group has completed five sessions, the mentor distributes the *Practicum Group Final Evaluation Feedback Form* for participants to fill out. Through consensus, the group determines if additional practicum sessions are needed.

MENTORING PRACTICUM DISCERNMENT SESSIONS

Whenever a practicum discernment group meets, a mentor needs to be present – sitting unobtrusively apart from the discernment group as a non-anxious, prayerful presence.

As mentor:

1. Take a back-up supply of *Feedback Form for Practicum Discernment Group* to each session.
2. Participate with the group through silent prayer. Observe the proceedings, but do not intervene in the course of a session. If needed, offer suggestions before the convener begins a discernment session and/or offer a concise hint, such as, “Remember chapter 5,” during the break.
3. At the end of the session make sure the convener has collected all of the completed feedback forms. Read all the forms; then offer suggestions to the discerners to help them reflect upon their experience. Help the group both to notice what went well and to think about things that might have been handled more effectively. Since it is useful for the mentor to know how the discerners perceive themselves before making comments, the information on the feedback forms provides helpful data for conducting the review. Sometimes the mentor can seem less critical by citing the group members’ observations. Focus especially on what worked well and be as gentle as possible with the criticism. Overanalyzing the session can interfere with the effectiveness of the discernment that is unfolding. Sometimes some written suggestions can be mailed to the group in lieu of an oral review session.

Every practicum discernment group needs a mentor. The training leaders may recruit help from other trained leaders or from trained discerners who have demonstrated a good grasp of the process. After each trainee has completed four practice sessions, the discerners-in-training may serve as mentors for the additional practicum sessions. Once the training is completed, mentors are no longer needed when discernment groups meet. Communities with a sufficient number of trained discerners may assign a prayer support person to each group. This person receives the focus person write-up in advance, then gathers with the group, but sits apart, supporting the discernment through constant prayer.

SUPPORT AND RENEWAL

Listening Hearts discernment is communal in nature –“Helping people hear God’s call *through community*.” People striving together gain strength from one another. When a core of people committed to practicing spiritual discernment touches the life of the faith community in which it lives, an ever-expanding network of support begins to develop. Some who are part of the larger network will be drawn into the nucleus so that over time it grows in size and strength.

In both the individuals associated with the program and in the specific community of faith, if the use of discernment does not move forward, it regresses. “Use it or lose it,” as the saying goes. The practice of spiritual discernment feeds itself. The challenge is to stay centered in God and faithful in applying the principles of spiritual discernment.

An annual retreat day can help a discernment ministry team sharpen its focus. Devoting a day to seeking God’s guidance for their life together helps the team to stay alive in the Spirit. Appropriate Scripture passages coupled with a meditation exercise adapted from *Listening Hearts’ Retreat Designs and Meditation Exercises* can help frame the event.

A small group of people, dedicated to the task and immersed in the Spirit, has the power to infuse a congregation or diocese with new life.

**SPEARHEADING
A DISCERNMENT COMMUNITY**

INFORMING THE CONGREGATION

Congregations are fluid. New people move in as others move out. People's circumstances change; their readiness to hear a particular message fluctuates. Publicity needs to be constant so that it can hit the right person at the right time. Moreover, people forget easily. Information needs to be reinforced in as many ways as possible. Disseminate the details about Listening Hearts programs and books through fliers, brochures, Sunday bulletins, parish newsletters, and bulletin boards. Make announcements at meetings, education programs, and worship services.

The program also needs to be explained in as many ways as possible. Explain something one way and one person perks up. Explain it another way and someone else responds. For this reason, it is best to draw upon different individuals to write or speak from one time to the next.

A plan for the year can help ensure that publicity is varied and well-paced. Listening Hearts brochures, book fliers, and Listening Hearts publicity packets are available from the office of Listening Hearts Ministries in Baltimore, at listening@listeninghearts.org, or at 410-366-1851.

PROVIDING PROGRAMS

A variety of programs can be offered to a community. The *Listening Hearts Manual for Discussion Leaders*, available for free download at www.listeninghearts.org, is a valuable resource for introductory programs. It provides comprehensive guidance for planning and leading a discussion series on *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community, 20th Anniversary Edition*. The goal of the manual is to encourage an approach that enables participants to use the ideas in the book to reflect upon their own spiritual experiences rather than engage in theoretical discourse. Parts of the manual provide material that can be drawn upon to shape existing programs. For instance, portions of it can be used to plan sessions for adult forums. Or, at meetings of a vestry, board, commission, or council, a different question from the “Suggested Questions” section can be selected to use at the beginning of each meeting, with time allotted for quiet reflection and sharing. Or, ideas in the manual can be applied to support groups to help the members relate to God and one another on a more intimate level.

To feed those who want to partake more deeply, use *Listening Hearts Retreat Designs and Meditation Exercises*, or *Heartlinks* from the Listening Hearts website: www.listeninghearts.org. to plan meditation mornings, retreat days, and weekend retreats. The *Retreat Designs* book can also serve people who want to do the meditation exercises on their own, but in covenant with others.

Opportunities for retreats and meditation can help members of a congregation learn about concepts presented in *Listening Hearts* and assimilate them through experience.

Other available resources for sharing with groups include the Discernment Listening Guidelines and *A Primer on Spiritual Discernment*; both can be downloaded from the Listening Hearts website at www.listeninghearts.org.

Finally, the entire *Grounded in God* book can be used as a resource to introduce a decision-making group such as a vestry, session, or diocesan commission to the practice of spiritual discernment for their work together. The nine appendices at the back of the book supply step-by-step suggestions for working with such groups.

PERMEATING THE CONGREGATION

When the first small group completes its training in discernment, those trained often feel lonely. They have something they want to share with others, but it is intangible and hard to explain. They can easily feel like voices crying in the wilderness. Yet, if they persevere and do what they can to spread the ideas and give others an opportunity to drink of the water they have found, in time the land can seem less barren and the desert may come to life. Particularly if others go through the discernment training, a critical mass begins to develop and momentum builds so that things start to happen on their own.

To help make the soil fertile, the *Listening Hearts Songbook* along with the music accompaniment files, both available for download from www.listeninghearts.org, can be made available to groups and gatherings to foster a prayerful tone through singing. Those who have been trained can suggest that the meetings they attend begin with a centering silence. The ministry team may want to propose that the “Discernment Listening Guidelines” (*Grounded in God*, Appendix 1, or downloaded from listeninghearts.org) be considered as a norm for parish groups. The Thomas Merton Prayer (on the last page of *Listening Hearts*, 20th Anniversary Edition) can be introduced to the congregation. Parishioners can be urged to read *Listening Hearts* and *Grounded in God*. Books can be kept available for borrowing or purchasing. Over time, as more and more lives are touched, the spirit of discernment may permeate the parish.

ORDERING PRIORITIES

No ministry team can implement all of the possibilities for discernment ministry in their congregation at any given time. The abilities and energy level of the group ebb and flow from one year to the next.

Periodically, the team needs to meet to seek discernment for their work together, using *Grounded in God* as a guide. The following checklist can help groups recall areas that need to be considered:

- Overall coordination
- Publicity
- Book distribution
- Book discussion
- Retreat and meditation opportunities
- Work with existing parish groups
- Discernment training
- Discernment groups

Through discernment, those active in the program can develop a sense of what responsibilities they are called to fulfill for a specified block of time and plan how they will get the work done.

COORDINATING THE EFFORT

Coordinating the work of the ministry team is an important job that needs to be done well. Whoever assumes this position probably should not take responsibility for any other specific work of the team. It is the coordinator who schedules and convenes the meetings of the team. In between the meetings, the coordinator keeps close tabs on each area of responsibility that the group has decided to assume, making sure that all of the work gets done properly and in a timely manner. If problems arise, the coordinator needs to either work them out or call a special meeting of the group.

The coordinator needs to make sure that careful notes are taken at each meeting and distributed to the members to help those involved remember what they agreed to do. This helps keep the life of the group on track.

Responsibilities can be reviewed and re-negotiated at each meeting. This often prevents burnout. If discernment is sought on a continuing basis, the ministry team should stay fresh and alive in the Spirit.

**OFFERING DISCERNMENT
GROUPS**

WHAT IS A DISCERNMENT GROUP?

In a participating congregation, anyone wrestling with a problem or issue who wants to seek God’s guidance in a focused way may ask the contact person for a discernment group. Three trained discerners are then appointed to serve in a discernment group for that person around that issue. The group, which includes the person seeking discernment (called “the focus person”), meets only when all four members are present.

Each meeting of the group is scheduled for three hours. The discerners keep everything about the meeting confidential unless the focus person explicitly requests otherwise. This means that discerners never initiate any conversation about the content of the meeting with the focus person, with one another, or with anyone else outside of a formal discernment session. The meetings follow a basic format:

1. The first session begins with introductions, some introductory comments by the convener, perhaps some words of assurance and a suitable prayer; then, a period of silence which is announced for a specific amount of time. The convener concludes the silence in some appropriate way and then asks the focus person to articulate the question to be explored and provides some brief background.
2. If the issue seems unclear, the group may ask questions for clarification. Next, questions to establish relevant background are appropriate, followed by questions that explore rational considerations. The group then returns to silence in order to prayerfully let a slower pace and more reflective questions emerge to help the focus person explore the issue. The focus person is encouraged to respond to the questions, but is never required to do so.

3. A half-hour before the end of each session, the focus person is offered the opportunity to ask questions of the discerners. The focus person may want to hear insights or feelings of the discerners, or perhaps parallel experiences that the discerners have had. Or, the focus person may want to request prayer images or silence (see Appendix 1 of the 20th Anniversary Edition of *Listening Hearts*). This is the time for the focus person to ask questions or make requests, and for the discerners to respond.

4. Before the closing prayers, the convener asks if anyone feels that another meeting is desirable. Participants need to bring appointment calendars in case the group decides to schedule another meeting.

THE CONTACT PERSON

The discernment group contact person is in charge of organizing the discernment groups. Duties for the contact person begin anew each time a potential focus person inquires about the possibility of a discernment group.

Whenever a request is initiated, the contact person needs to respond:

1. Set up an appointment to get together with the potential focus person.
2. Begin praying for the person.
3. Meet with the prospective focus person. During your time together, stay in a discernment mode, listening and offering questions to develop a sense of the person's needs.
 - Informally convey the basic tenor of Listening Hearts discernment – that discerners prayerfully listen and gently raise questions to help cast light on where God is in the situation and to discover where the Spirit may be pointing (not to solve the problem or tell the person what to do).
 - If discernment does not seem to be the appropriate path for the person, use a discernment discipline (prayerful questions, attentive listening) to help the person see that some other approach (pastoral counseling, marriage counseling, career counseling, therapy) might be more what the person wants or needs. If such is the case, help the person make the necessary contacts.

- Let the person borrow a copy of this manual, pointing out the section “Offering Discernment Groups.” Also lend him or her copies of *Listening Hearts, 20th Anniversary Edition* and *Grounded in God*. Get a sense of how much reading seems to suit the person and the situation; develop a reading plan.
 - In consultation with the focus person, prayerfully select three discerners with an eye to putting together a diverse and balanced group. Discuss alternates in case anyone declines.
4. Contact the selected discerners to determine their willingness to serve, designating one of them as the convener (the convener must be a highly responsible person). Give the convener the names, addresses, and phone numbers of the focus person and discerners. Remind the convener to use “Convening a Discernment Group” in this manual as a checklist.

5. Ask the focus person to write a few paragraphs stating the question to be explored and providing background information pertinent to the issue (see *Listening Hearts*, Appendix 1), with instructions to share with the convener. Be sure to give the focus person the name, e-mail address, and phone number of the convener.
6. If persons from outside the immediate community ask for discernment groups, the program may be able to accommodate them if sufficient discerners are available.
7. Keep an ample supply of the *Feedback Form for Discernment Groups* on hand and distribute them to the conveners as needed.
8. In some congregations, the contact person may take responsibility for publicizing the purpose and availability of discernment groups.

The contact person holds an important and delicate position which needs to be filled by someone who is sensitive, insightful, prayerful, and very reliable. Make sure that members of the congregation know how to get in touch with the contact person and can do so without difficulty.

THE FOCUS PERSON

The person seeking discernment is called the “focus person.” In a participating congregation, anyone who wants the help of a discernment group gets in touch with the contact person and then follows these steps:

1. Meets with the contact person to learn more about how the program works and to make sure that spiritual discernment is what he or she wants.
2. Reads *Listening Hearts, 20th Anniversary Edition* – at the very least the introduction, chapters 1 through 7, and appendices 1 and 2. The contact person may have copies to lend out.
3. Also, the first six chapters of *Grounded in God* can be particularly helpful.
4. Helps the contact person select three discerners to constitute a diverse and balanced group, one of whom will be designated as “the convener.”
5. Writes a few paragraphs stating the question to be explored and providing background information pertinent to the issue (see Appendix 1 of *Listening Hearts, 20th Anniversary Edition*).

6. E-mails the aforementioned informational write-up to the convener to distribute to the other discerners. At this point, the convener replaces the contact person as the designated support person.
7. Prays daily for oneself and the discerners in preparation for the discernment meeting.

When a person requests a discernment group, discernment already has begun. It continues during the preparation, intensifies and takes on an added dimension during the actual meeting, and continues after the meeting has concluded.

Discerners gather not to solve problems or give advice, but to prayerfully listen and gently raise questions that may bring a clearer sense of what God is asking. Discerners treat what is said in a discernment group as highly confidential.

Discernment is a time of becoming aligned with God. Sometimes the work of the Holy Spirit is imperceptible. On occasion a vivid insight emerges. Whether the fruits are known or unknown, time spent together in prayerful listening is always time well spent.

SERVING IN A DISCERNMENT GROUP

Because individuals who gather to help a person with discernment share in a sacred trust, they are asked to place a high priority on the responsibilities involved. A discerner can do the following things in order to remain in a state of readiness:

1. Attend periodic meetings of the discernment ministry team. These are opportunities to practice discernment in relation to group concerns.
2. Periodically re-read *Listening Hearts, 20th Anniversary Edition* and the first six chapters of *Grounded in God*.
3. Prayerfully review Chapters 1 through 7 and Appendices 1 and 2 of *Listening Hearts, 20th Anniversary Edition* in preparation for each discernment session. Pay particular attention to Chapter 5, “Is It God We Are Hearing?” and review it, since the purpose of discernment is to distinguish God’s voice from other voices. Also re-read Chapter 5 of *Grounded in God* for further review of the Signs of the Spirit. And finally, go to the Listening Hearts website: www.listeninghearts.org and print out Chapter 8 of *A Primer on Spiritual Discernment* (Signs of the Spirit) to use for handy reference.

4. Pay careful attention to discernment procedures so that everyone in the group works as a unit. Discerners (with the focus person) “gather together, not for discussion or dialogue, but for prayer. The prayer is in silence, in listening, in waiting for the Lord to speak through us. The end is not decision-making; but to walk with the Lord while living the question. The way is not through counseling techniques, advice or commentary, but through prayerful, simple questions asked only after quiet reflection.” (*Listening Hearts, 20th Anniversary Edition*, p. 72).
5. Remember the importance of consensus in discernment. Consensus is implied if no one feels that another meeting is needed.
6. Pray in preparation for and during the course of each meeting.
7. Bring an appointment calendar to each meeting.

CONVENING A DISCERNMENT GROUP

As soon as the discernment group is appointed, the convener becomes a guide to the focus person for the balance of his or her preparation, makes all of the arrangements for the discernment session and convenes the session. The following list summarizes the responsibilities:

1. Confer with the focus person to select a comfortable place for the group to meet. Determine some dates that are suitable for the focus person for a discernment meeting. Get a feel for the comfort level that the focus person has for silence so you can determine the length of silence for the beginning of the meeting. Give the focus person an opportunity to articulate any fears or concerns; try to be reassuring. Make sure the focus person realizes that the discerners treat the sessions as extremely confidential.
2. Poll the discerners to determine a time when all can meet for a discernment session.
3. Make arrangements to use the meeting place. This includes getting a key if needed.
4. Notify each person in the group of the time and place of the discernment session. Remind them to pray in preparation for the gathering and to bring appointment calendars.

5. If the focus person's write-up is confusing, unfocused, or too lengthy, work with the person to help improve the presentation of the issue. Then distribute the focus person's write-up by e-mail or hard copies to the other two discerners several days prior to the meeting.
6. Get feedback forms from the contact person in advance of the discernment session. (For a practicum, the feedback forms are obtained from and returned to the mentor, rather than the contact person.)
7. Arrive at the meeting place at least 20 minutes ahead of time. Arrange the furniture and adjust the lighting.
8. Greet the focus person, make introductions if needed, and make the focus person as comfortable as possible.
9. Follow the guidelines in Appendix 1 of *Listening Hearts, 20th Anniversary Edition*.
10. If another meeting is desirable, schedule it before leaving, and continue as convener.
11. If another meeting is not planned, remind discerners to return the focus person's write-up to the focus person. If the write-up has been e-mailed, it must be deleted from all computers.

12. Have each person present (including the mentor and any observers if it is a training session) fill out a feedback form before leaving.
13. Return the filled-in forms to the discernment contact person (or the mentor, if it is a practicum).

OUTLINE FOR CONVENING THE DISCERNMENT SESSION

The following checklist enumerates details the convener needs to keep in mind at the time that the discernment group meets:

1. Arrive well ahead of the starting time, arrange the furniture, welcome the focus person, attend to the focus person's comfort.
2. Begin at the appointed time. If the focus person does not know all of the discerners, invite the discerners to say something about themselves. Offer some words to relax and reassure the focus person. Perhaps offer short prayer.
3. Announce a period of silence for centering (specify the intended length).
4. Conclude the silence with the Thomas Merton Prayer on the last page of *Listening Hearts, 20th Anniversary Edition*, or some other prayer or passage of Scripture.
5. Ask the focus person to articulate the issue for discernment and give a bit of background.
6. When the focus person finishes speaking, thank him or her. Then check to make sure that the question is clear to everyone. Once the question is clear, invite questions, first to clarify the information and then to explore the rational aspects of the issue.

7. Provide opportunity for questions that come from the head to be asked first. Then suggest that the group take some time for silence so that the mind can descend into the heart. At this point, the pace should become slower with questions becoming reflective and evocative.
8. After an hour-and-twenty minutes, if no one has requested a break and the group has not yet moved to the concluding segment, begin to look for an opening to announce a break. Suggest a length for the break. Propose whether it be silent or talking. Permit an opportunity for the group to make alternate proposals.
9. Following the break, reconvene the group by saying a prayer and/or requesting a short period of silence.
10. Two-and-a-half -hours after the starting time – unless the group has already moved into the concluding portion – state that the time has arrived to give the focus person the opportunity to make requests.
11. No later than ten minutes before the closing time, ask if anyone feels that another session is desirable. If the group decides to meet again, ask everyone to get out their calendars and schedule another meeting. (You will continue on as convener.)

12. Invite a time of free and open closing prayers. Conclude the prayers in some suitable way.

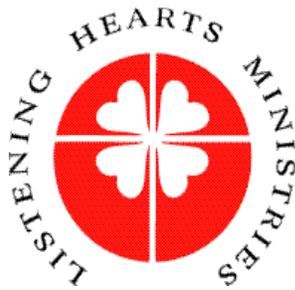
If anyone suggests that the discernment session end before the full time has passed, check with the group to determine if everyone concurs. If any member of the group feels that it is premature to conclude, the session should continue on for the full amount of time. If everyone agrees that it is time to wrap up, then the convener initiates the final half-hour portion by inviting questions of the focus person. Once the focus person begins making requests, discerners should not revert to asking questions and should limit their responses to what the focus person asks of them.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Spiritual discernment is mysterious, much of it occurring beneath the surface where we cannot observe it. The Listening Hearts program is organic, with parallels in nature that are reassuring. We must till the soil, scatter the seeds, and water the land. Yet, of ourselves we cannot make the seeds grow. Often, we do not know which ones are taking root. At first, the seeds lie hidden in darkness. In time, tiny plants develop; some push their way through the soil and flourish. Eventually, healthy ones re-seed to produce still more plants. The circle brings forth bounty, suggesting that if we sow the seeds of spiritual discernment, we can trust God to produce the harvest.

Jesus also said, "The Kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

Mark 4:26-29 (NRSV)



Listening Hearts Ministries
1407 Bolton Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21217-4202
410-366-1851
listening@listeninghearts.org
www.listeninghearts.org