

# LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES

# EXPLORATIONS

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## Deferring to the Spirit

**Suzanne Farnham**  
**Founder and Program Director**

Spiritual discernment is a quest to be at one with God: to walk with God, go where God leads us, and do what God would have us do.

We need not search far and wide. God is both deep within and all around us. We need only sit still, quiet ourselves, and open ourselves to the Love, Light, and Wisdom already there, waiting for us.

Asking preliminary questions helps us get our bearings: What is our current situation? How did it develop? What issues does it bring to the surface? What choices do we see, and what are their relative merits? What other people are involved?

Once we have this basic information, it is time to move beyond humanly conceived questions, which can invade the stillness. It is time to defer to the Spirit, let all questions cease, enter the depths of silence, and let all that we think and feel gently hover 'round us. As we loosen our grip on desires and ideas, agendas and plans, we clear space for the Spirit of God to move about freely.

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In this expansive uncluttered space, time can stop until the QUESTION or the set of QUESTions emerges. These questions, prompted by the Spirit, tend to be evocative or deeply reflective. They get beneath the surface, engage the imagination, unlock new insights, carry us to new perspectives. Questions that spring forth from the Center of God transform our vision and infuse us with the power of God's love, joy, and energy. Ultimately they blanket us with a sense of God's peace.

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## Deferring to the Spirit *(continued from page 1)*

This path of spiritual discernment first tests our confidence in God, then reinforces it. It unveils for us, through experience, the profound truth of what Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians: “In the words of Scripture, ‘Things beyond our seeing, things beyond our hearing, things beyond our imagining, all prepared by God for those who love him,’ these it is that God has revealed to us through the Spirit.”

Amen, and thanks be to God.

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## Listening into the Light

**Torrence Harman**  
**Richmond, VA**

Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” (1 Samuel 3:9)

How do we hear God’s call amid all the sounds of life? The Samuel syndrome (just who was that calling in the night?) continues to challenge listening ears and hearts. The Episcopal Diocese of Virginia, like an attentive Eli, has set out to help those within its borders who might be hearing a call to faithful leadership, either lay or ordained.

The diocese engaged Listening Hearts Ministries to develop a process and train facilitators in the art of heartfelt listening for the sounds of God’s calling within the life of an individual and the life of faithful community. The process is one of spiritual discernment. A diocesan process formerly grounded in evaluation and assessment will now be founded on one of collaboration and facilitated discernment for leadership in the Church.

In the early 1990s I read *Listening Hearts*. It was an interesting choice for a then attorney spending most of her days in a courtroom. I could never have guessed that fifteen years later I would be an ordained Episcopal priest and be spending six days with one of the *Listening Hearts* authors in training to help others discern their calling to spiritual and faithful leadership in God’s Church. But God is very patient and a “Samuel night” is a temporal concept of great elasticity within the heart of God.

Twelve of us (certainly a biblically significant number) responded to the initial invitation to become diocesan spiritual discernment facilitators. The excitement I felt for this opportunity was clear, my response immediate. In February, with the other eleven, I arrived at Richmond Hill Retreat Center, a former convent. It sits on a high place in the middle of the city of Richmond. It’s a place where faithful people have been listening for the heartbeat of God for decades.

We sat in high-ceilinged rooms surrounded by windows that brought us within the sacred embracing space of a natural cathedral of trees, both deciduous and evergreen. We shared hearty homemade meals in the community dining room as we refueled and renewed ourselves for the extraordinary work of exploring inner sacred spaces. We slept in monastic rooms (a bed, a desk, a chair, a lamp), reminding us that life can feel even more abundant when lived in simple, hollowed out spaces.

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## **Listening...** *(continued from page 2)*

In retrospect I call this process of discernment spiritual “spelunking,” cave exploring. I’ve never actually been a spelunker, but I remember my son talking about his excursions underground in the mountains with school friends as a teenager, and I’ve been drawn to articles about cave exploration and the spelunkers who search deep within inner terrain.

And so the diocesan spiritual discernment facilitators, the Listening Hearts Ministries guides and volunteer seekers, spent hours in exploration. Going deep, we listened for the slightest sound that signaled the presence of the Spirit – a trickle of living water, *ruah* in a breath of moving air. Our senses strained for movements of the Spirit reaching out and touching us. We crawled at times, squeezing through tight spots. We followed tunnels that sometimes led somewhere and other times not. We sat, at times centered in darkness, seeking cracks of light filtering through what seemed to be solid walls. We reached within the depths for a choice nugget to hold up to the light. We talked, sometimes too much, getting caught in the cross reverberation of our own echoes filling the space, distracting us from hearing the echoes of God’s heartbeat calling us closer. We offered up questions punctuated by silence, inviting the seeker’s soul to give voice to the Spirit at work within. At times, we bumped into each other. At other times we bumped unexpectedly into the Spirit, who was with us whether we felt the Spirit’s presence or not.

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*By God’s amazing grace may we become faithful guides to others, remembering that we follow a Divine Guide who is always present, calling, eager to lead whoever is listening into the light.*

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I treasure this time of exploration and the leadership of the patient and experienced discernment “spelunkers” of Listening Hearts Ministries. Twelve of us have now emerged from our time of training. By God’s amazing grace may we become faithful guides to others, remembering that we follow a Divine Guide who is always present, calling, eager to lead whoever is listening into the light.

*The Rev. Torrence Harman, assistant rector of St. James’s Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia, oversees the adult education, Christian formation, and retreat programming for St. James’s and enjoys writing poetry.*

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## **Graced with Food for the Journey**

**Sven deBaars**  
**Ashland, VA**

On a summer day when I was five or six, my older brother and I decided to go for a picnic at a park a few blocks from our house. Our mother prepared a sack for us to take. When we got to the park we sat on a bench in the sun near the swings and opened the sack. First we saw the sandwiches and ate them. Next we pulled out chips and gobbled them down. Then we found drinks, apples, and candy bars and consumed them all. Finally, we discovered a large checked cloth on which we might have sat. Our mother had packed everything we needed, but in our haste to move on, we hadn’t taken time to consider her intention. We had sat on a bench in the hot sun when we could have spread out a banquet in the shade of one of the park’s large trees.

*(continued on page 4)*

### MISSION STATEMENT

Listening Hearts Ministries provides a range of programs, publications, and services that teach people the practice of spiritual discernment through prayerful listening in supportive communities.



*They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.*

— 1Cor.10:3-4

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### Graced With Food... *(continued from page 3)*

This story comes to mind as I reflect on my experience as a seeker in a recent group discernment. The Diocese of Virginia has engaged Listening Hearts Ministries to train facilitators to help parish committees learn group spiritual discernment, with the intention of making group spiritual discernment normative in the diocese. I was participating as one seeking discernment toward ordained ministry. Group discernment was not new to me. Almost two years ago I had gone through a process to become a postulant for ordination. What was new was the commitment of the new group to allow spaces that the Spirit could fill. This group focused not on a task but on listening for God's intention. I realized that whereas the first process had given me permission to move forward on my journey, this new process had graced me with food for the journey.

I believe we all are on a journey, and that God has marvelous things in store for us. The discernment process that Listening Hearts is helping my diocese bring about will help seekers and the parish discernment groups understand that God has given each of us a sack with all we need. By learning to allow the Spirit into the group, we can understand more clearly God's vision for the glorious picnic that he wants for us.

*Sven deBaars*, a member of the Diocese of Virginia Task Force on Implementation of Ministry, will soon be attending seminary full time in preparation for ordination to the priesthood.