

## EXPLORATIONS



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**Inside this Issue**

*Treading on Holy Ground*  
 The Rt. Rev. Robert Ihloff

*God's Time*  
 Rachel Barham

*Listening for Sabbath*  
 Alison Masterpasqua

**Treading on Holy Ground**

**The Rt. Rev. Robert Ihloff**  
**Prince Frederick, MD**

For the believing Christian, the space between you and me is never just vacant air. In that space, the Holy Spirit is active and alive. As we share the spiritual journey with others, we enter on holy ground. Hearing and sharing where God is active, or sometimes seemingly absent, in our lives fills this holy space. Sometimes, like Moses at the burning bush, I feel the urge to remove my shoes, because I know I am treading on holy ground (Exodus 3:5)! Anyone who has ever participated in a group that fostered honest sharing of our deepest selves or been in spiritual direction has probably had a similar feeling. In my own life, it has happened so often I have come to expect it, yet its power almost always catches me unaware.

It happened to me recently as I led a retreat for Maryland clergy based on *Keeping in Tune with God*, a Listening Hearts guide for clergy discernment. Some years ago I was formally trained in the philosophy and methodology of Listening Hearts. When recently invited, I readily agreed to facilitate a retreat based on a new model that would serve as a pilot program and provide information to be used in structuring future similar retreats. Our objective was to provide a structure for self-awareness and creative sharing in small groups that would enable clergy to get more fully in touch with where the Holy Spirit was moving in their own lives. This is critical for clergy at all stages of their ministry, as it is for any Christian in the exercise of ministry. The demands on clergy are endless, the opportunities endless and often exciting. Keeping on schedule while remaining open to new opportunities, constantly being called upon to reprioritize, balancing the countless demands of others with our own sense of what we should or could be doing can easily wear clergy out. It all has the potential for causing us to lose sight of the central aspect of our calling to serve the living God while serving the needs of God's human children.

I decided to participate in a small group as well as facilitate the retreat, especially on this trial run. This proved a wise decision. It gave me a first-hand experience of how the materials worked in bringing forth a renewed sense of God's call. It also served as an opportunity for me to go deeper in my own discernment and to receive the help of others in my small group to sort some things out. Ministry is always a two-way street; so are teaching and facilitating. We learn from one another in the process of honest sharing.

On a day I hoped to be of some assistance to my companion clergy, I discovered yet again that they were of help to me as well. It happened, and consistently does happen, when people gather with the stated purpose of hearing God's call together. Often the fruits of the Holy Spirit are borne out sometime after the event, once the learnings and insights of the retreat have been more fully realized and acted upon. The exciting thing is that the end result is never predictable at the outset—the Spirit moves in unexpected ways.

*The Rt. Rev. Robert Ihloff, retired bishop of the Diocese of Maryland, serves on the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops. He is a program associate for Listening Hearts Ministries with responsibility for leading clergy group retreats. His Doctor of Ministry thesis project was in the area of group spiritual direction.*

## God's Time

**Rachel E. Barham**  
**Washington, DC**

"We're on God's time." That was a common refrain when my aunt was in and out of the hospital, dealing with a long-term illness. It was partly a jab at the failings of the health care system and partly a real acknowledgement that we were not always in control.

The vestry of the Church of the Epiphany in Washington, D.C. experienced God's time during its January retreat. We brought in Suzanne Farnham, a discernment facilitator and co-author of the book *Listening Hearts*, which we all received in advance. We spent Friday evening learning from her about the process of spiritual discernment recommended by Listening Hearts Ministries, and then, for several hours on Saturday, we put the process into practice.

Group spiritual discernment is a process of trying to listen intently for God's call concerning a particular question or issue, and—hopefully—reaching a consensus of what we feel God is calling us to do. The guidelines take us out of the typical meeting format, asking us to try really listening to what everyone is saying instead of forming our own thoughts while someone is speaking; to take time after someone has spoken and reflect on what he or she has said; to consider carefully all the things we could say versus what we should say; and, in doing these things, to distill what we believe God is calling us to do. The process involves a great deal of what would normally be considered uncomfortable silence, giving everyone time to reflect. God's time, indeed.

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and for those who make in-kind contributions.*

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What was our discernment issue? Reflecting on Scripture passages, we asked how God is calling us to carry our mission forward as we find ourselves with both a beautifully renovated building and a less-than-ideal financial situation. Changing the mission statement was not off the table, but there turned out to be a strong consensus in the vestry that what we are doing is indeed what we should be doing.

Once we started practicing the discernment guidelines, the insights everyone shared were truly amazing. Several of us wondered how much better the world would be if politicians tried this sort of discernment process. We would consider a word, a concept, or a Scripture passage and share two or three completely different but valid interpretations, enlightening the group by a unique sort of collaboration.

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Last year's vestry retreat anticipated the great disruption of the renovation work and focused on the wilderness experience. We are now beginning to emerge from that wilderness to a new future with endless exciting possibilities. Our vestry members are rolling up their sleeves, ready for a season of hard work, to continue living out our mission but also to share the good news about all the things that make Epiphany special. We feel that we are all on God's time. Our 2012 vestry statement of consensus read:

We are called to journey forward, living in the light of Christ and transmitting that light to others as we work to pursue our mission.

*Rachel Evangeline Barham is a freelance classical singer who serves on the vestry at the Church of the Epiphany in downtown Washington, D.C. When she is not singing or writing or cooking, she is probably either watching birds from her stand-up paddleboard or pulling something up from the backyard vegetable garden she shares with her spouse, James Rogers.*

## **Listening for Sabbath**

**Alison Masterpasqua  
Swarthmore, PA**

Gone is the definition of Sabbath that I developed as a child—no friends, no excursions, no errands, but plenty of boredom. We were not so strict that there was no TV, no playing, no noise, but I've heard stories of families where this was true for their Sabbath observances.

At a series of three Listening Hearts retreats, members of Swarthmore United Methodist Church contemplated these underlying principles of Sabbath:

On a regular basis, work hard over a substantial period of time. Then, on a regular basis, for a limited chunk of time, withdraw from the routine of daily life (responsibilities, pressures, business) to focus on God's presence and share in a communal way.

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### 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.

*By eliciting consciousness of how God is acting in one person or situation, [spiritual discernment] spurs all involved to look at their own lives to see where God is at work.*

—Keeping in Tune with God, p. 39

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What a sense of freedom I felt as I contemplated this statement. I listened to the yearnings in my heart and a whole new way to look at Sabbath opened up. These principles of Sabbath are not the list of restrictions from my childhood. Our world today is so different that instead of relying on outdated traditions, it makes sense to find other ways to create Sabbath. I now view Sabbath as a time to focus on God's presence. It is an opportunity to remove myself from the busyness of life and to listen to my heart where God resides. I look for ways to nurture my faith and provide solace and growth.

Maybe our Sabbath time does not need to be a full day once a week or always on Sunday. Maybe we don't need the world to dictate when and how we step away from busyness. Instead, it is our responsibility to engage in meaningful observances that give us time to reflect on our lives and our relationship with God.

As society changes and new ways of living emerge, we at Swarthmore United Methodist Church will engage in new ways to meaningfully observe Sabbath while remaining true to the unchanging, underlying principles of Sabbath. The series of retreats has set us on a joyful journey of discovering a meaningful Sabbath for our lives.

*Alison Masterpasqua works in the library at Swarthmore College and is a member of Swarthmore United Methodist Church. She finds joy in her family, knitting, gardening, and working with children and young adults.*