

LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES

EXPLORATIONS

VOLUME 15 NUMBER 2

Fall 2005



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The Power That Goes Beyond Our Wishes

Suzanne Farnham
Baltimore, MD

Spiritual discernment is a sacred endeavor, prompted by a desire to discover what God would have us do in our particular circumstances. We look for answers. We want to do what is right.

Ironically, as we develop a discipline of prayerful listening and recognize the many ways in which God communicates with us, we begin to suspect that God may be unwilling to spell out precise instructions. Following orders dispensed by a distant deity is not the essence of life in Christ.

When we live in and as the body of Christ, we are beckoned into an ever more intimate relationship with God and with the people we encounter in our daily lives. As we immerse ourselves in God's presence, no matter what situation we face, God's love for each and every person begins to stir within us; God's wisdom surrounds us; the Spirit of God motivates and sustains us; God opens us to a more profound sense of kinship with others.

Often we do not receive explicit answers to our questions. Instead, we are challenged to trust the mysterious power of that guiding presence. Through the deep, prayerful listening that is central to spiritual discernment, God embraces our efforts to uncover his will for us. God then imparts to us a gift of even greater worth: quieter, closer, stronger relationships with both God and other people.

Thus, God graciously gives us what had been beyond our ability to desire or pray for, a gift that surpasses our mortal expectations.

“Through the deep, prayerful listening central to spiritual discernment, God embraces our efforts to uncover his will for us. God then imparts to us a gift of even greater worth: quieter, closer, stronger relationships with God and other people.”

Suzanne Farnham is founder and program director of Listening Hearts Ministries.

On Listening

Mary Hope Rhodes
Spartanburg, SC

What began as a Lenten study group at the Episcopal Church of the Advent in Spartanburg, SC, has become a bimonthly gathering of eight ladies of diverse ages, occupations, interests, and spiritual backgrounds. What keeps us together is not only our intention to grow into the people God has designed us to be but our desire to support each other as we all seek to live into God's will and to trust it. Alice Dorrance, our facilitator, had experienced *Listening Hearts* in Maryland before moving to Spartanburg. She knew about its gift. She listened to God's call to share the gift with us, which has enabled us all to grow.

It is so difficult for me, and perhaps for most of us, to be flexible about our own convictions. We tend to hold on to our opinions very tightly, believing that our way is the only right way. Thanks to *Listening Hearts*, I am more aware of my need to listen so that I may find answers that are right for me. The serendipitous gift is that the more I seek God's counsel, the more I realize how **right** God is and how dependent I am on Him for direction in my daily life. This awareness makes my own journey more comfortable, because God indeed is in charge and God will not lead me in the wrong direction. When I try to discern His call, I can trust that He will lead me down the right road.

I am now a better listener than I used to be, and I find that my faith is growing as I gain experience in discerning God's call. Thanks be to God!

“What keeps us together is not only our intention to grow into the people God has designed us to be but our desire to support each other as we all seek to live into God's will and to trust it.”

Mary Hope Rhodes, a speech and language pathologist is a member of the Worship and Liturgy Commission at the Church of the Advent and presently serves in the Outreach Program.

Why Don't More Churches Use Spiritual Discernment?

The Rev. David W. Malone
Jamaica Plain, MA

In July, I was a presenter at a national Presbyterian conference designed to promote the renewal of declining congregations and the increase of culturally diverse churches. In my reveries on the train going home, I imagined we were the ecclesiastical Frederick Law Olmsted's of our twenty-first-century church landscape, designing the spiritual garden of our churches, making beautiful and life-filled what has become worn and colorless.

All through the conference I heard speakers ask us to “discern clearly” how God is calling us and calling our churches to faithfulness. I heard “discernment” upheld as a means by which to pass beyond the treasured past and to discover the fresh new future to which God calls us. I recalled that the theological foundations of the Presbyterian movement are in the theology of the sixteenth-century reformer John Calvin, for whom discerning and acting on God's call was fundamental to Christian life.

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Why Don't...?

Surprisingly, never was the practice of discernment defined or described by these speakers, nor was any attention given to teaching how it might be done in practice. Perhaps we all thought this was the business of a different department in the Church.

Why, I wondered, is the learning and practice of discernment a hard sell in the churches? Why haven't parish priests and pastors, such as I was for forty years, jumped at the chance to be trained in this spiritual practice so absolutely central to defining that to which we are specifically called in a time when so much is uncertain and unprecedented for our lives? Why do we talk the talk but not walk the walk?

Are clergy and church leaders fearful of primary spiritual experience: uncontrolled encounters with the Living God and Holy Spirit? Why are we so ready to acquire and use helpful planning and management practices derived from secular sources to discover our purposes, goals, strategies, and projects but unwilling to engage in the very difficult work of examining our souls for these answers? Is the possible encounter with a burning bush or a "still small voice" a danger to our professionalism and our sense of control?

Or would learning the practice of discernment be just one task too many for parish clergy, among the last general practitioners in our complex society? These men and women are expected to be Jacks and Jills of all trades from raising the budget and supervising the building to leading wonderful liturgies, always kind and compassionate, wise and current theologically, ready with responses to life's deepest issues, unafraid of conflict and suffering, and capable of growing the congregation without causing any trouble to those who have been members for many years. Are clergy at such a breaking point of too many expectations that adding the capacity to do and enable spiritual discernment would be an overload?

Maybe the practice of discernment is just too intense for us or too strange a phenomenon. Does it sound adventuresome when we really don't want to go to unexplored places while trying to balance so many other uncertainties in ministry?

"Are clergy at the breaking point of too many expectations that adding the capacity of doing and enabling spiritual discernment is an overload?"

I would love to hear from other clergy, congregational leaders, and denominational staff: Why is discernment such a hard sell in our churches and to our clergy and leaders? Why, in a time of increased emphasis on the spirituality of Christian experience, does discernment not become a common ministry and practice in our churches, as familiar as our music and liturgies, as ordinary as our pastoral care and mission outreach? I'll summarize your responses in a future issue of *Explorations*.

David Malone, a retired pastor ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA), lives in Boston, where he worships at Hope Church (UCC/Disciples), and is a trustee of Listening Hearts Ministries. He can be reached by mail at 20 Tower St., #2, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130, by e-mail at davidwmalone@hotmail.com, or by phone at 617-522-5230.

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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.



“If we live by truth and love, we shall grow completely into Christ, who is the head by whom the whole body is fitted and joined together . . .”

— Ephesians 4:15-16

On The Move

This fall, The Rev. Pam Gregory and The Rev. Jennifer West will join Suzanne Farnham to train 15 people to serve in discernment groups for the Commission on Ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island. This intensive mentoring program will extend over two weekends.

People registered to date to attend the November 9-16 Ecumenical Training Week for Trainers come from the Disciples of Christ, the Church of the Brethren, and the Episcopal Church. Denominations represented in previous training weeks include Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Quaker, Mennonite, United Church of Christ, and Episcopal. Participants have come from as far away as Alaska.

New Board Member – Carolyn Miller

A longtime advocate and supporter of Listening Hearts Ministries and friend of founder, Suzanne Farnham, Carolyn Miller has watched the ministry grow from inception. She is enthusiastic about being more directly involved and will join with Frances Sullinger to focus on marketing programs and developing our client base.

Carolyn has an extended career in Episcopal schools from Maryland to Tennessee, where she has held a variety of roles including psychology teacher, Planning Coordinator, Director of Activities and Facilities, Director of Admissions, and Assistant Head for Student Life. Currently, she is Vice President of The Education Group, a teacher/administrator recruitment firm which serves Independent schools nationally.

Carolyn resides in Alexandria, VA where she attends historic Christ Church, Old Town, Alexandria. We welcome Carolyn to Listening Hearts Ministries.