

EXPLORATIONS



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Praying the Question

**Mike Croghan, Trustee
Herndon, VA**

In early 2017, it became apparent that the future of our little church was unclear.

Founded in 2001, the Church of the Common Table was a different kind of spiritual community. Made up primarily of people who had found both mainline and evangelical communities limiting, the church approached worship, service, and leadership in an open way, with each aspect emerging from the consensus of the congregants. Accordingly, we were firmly a part of the “Emerging Church” movement of the early twenty-first century, although not all of us were thrilled with that terminology.

But more than fifteen years into our journey together, we had lost much of our membership to the characteristic mobility of the Washington, DC, area. Many of our people had moved away, and it was no longer clear that our community was sustainable. Due to a lack of volunteer capacity, we had to suspend our children’s ministry, our monthly service projects, and much of our creative worship, reverting to a more conventional format of weekly services with a sermon and communion. The question arose: Are we being called by God to continue as a community?

So, in April 2017, we came together on the green grass at National Harbor to discern our future. With my foundation in spiritual discernment as a trained discerner and trustee with Listening Hearts, and from my reading of *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations*, I endeavored to help guide us through this time of searching.

For our first discernment session, we chose a Scripture passage to focus us: Isaiah 55:1, “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters!” We read the Discernment Listening Guidelines from *Grounded in God*. We prayed (starting a Thomas Merton prayer, “God, we have no idea where we are going...”) We were silent together, listening.

And we asked questions, including especially our central question for discernment:

“God, where would you have us, the Church of the Common Table, go from here?”

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From that first gathering on a warm and sunny spring day to our final discernment session over two years later, that question was a compass that kept our minds and hearts oriented toward the Holy Spirit's guidance. By asking what God would have us do rather than merely what we *should* do, we stayed within the territory of prayer—not mere discussion or debate (although there were many strongly held perspectives among us). By praying the question collectively as the Church of the Common Table, we strove to ensure that we would move as one, together, wherever we might be led. By repeatedly asking where we should go *from here*, we kept our focus simply on the next step, in the spirit of the Merton prayer: “We do not see the road ahead of us.”

We left the first session with no consensus on a path forward but agreed to meet again soon. And we did, twice more that year, in June and again in July. We kept praying, focusing on Scripture, and asking our question for discernment. Finally we came away with a consensus: that God was not done with this community yet but that because rent was by far our biggest monthly expense, we would need to find a new, more sustainable home.

After a search in which we spoke with leaders of a number of local churches, we found the new home we were looking for in a Methodist church in nearby Oakton. We moved in gradually over the middle of 2018. Encouraged by the pastor of our new host church, we aspired to turn around our decline and eventually be sent out again as a new, independent church plant.

In November 2018, we continued our discernment using the same Listening Hearts practices and a new Scripture for meditation: Acts 2, the story of the first Christian Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended and set the church afire. We hoped for the Spirit to descend on us in the same way, filling us with new vitality. But, crucially, we didn't hold tightly to that expectation, instead continuing to ask our question for discernment: “God, where would you have us go from here?”

By the middle of the next year, it was becoming apparent that we were not experiencing the resurgence in numbers or energy that we hoped for. We were now down to fewer than ten regular attendees at our worship services. We held two more meetings for discernment, in June and July 2019. We prayed, we listened, and we deepened our years-long friendships. We kept sitting with our question. And finally, we achieved what felt like a spiritual consensus again—a different one from the last time. We held our final regular worship service in October of that year.

Our friendships remain, and we've come together since then for various reasons, including a memorable Easter service on Zoom in that fearful pandemic spring of 2020. Our email list is still a place where any of us can go to seek help and prayer. But in many important ways, the church that meant so much to so many has come to an end.

It wasn't easy coming to that conclusion. But we kept asking our question for discernment, and trying to remain open to wherever that question, and the Holy Spirit, might lead us. In this time of great change for all kinds of church communities, we must remember that God is the God of both beginnings and endings, and remember to hold our desires and opinions—even our convictions—lightly. We couldn't have reached that consensus without the tools and practices provided by Listening Hearts, which equipped us to discern openly, prayerfully, and—most importantly—together.

Mike Croghan is a software engineer and poet and a trustee of Listening Hearts Ministries. He is a cradle Episcopalian who crawled out of the cradle early, went on some adventures (including three years as a practicing Tibetan Buddhist and a long sojourn with the “Emerging Church”), and is now once again active in his Episcopal church, the Church of the Holy Comforter in Vienna, VA.

Discovering Discernment in the Wildhorse Saloon**Mabeth Hudson
Sparks, MD**

Spiritual discernment is the art of critical attention that is able to recognize the Divine presence in its expected and unexpected forms.

– John O’Donohue, *Eternal Echoes*, p. 193

Who would have predicted that I would first hear about the concept of discernment in the middle of a Nashville bar while watching a thrill-seeker being thrashed around by a mechanical bull?

God is everywhere, especially in unexpected places and spaces!

At that time, I was a mom of three young children, delighted to be away in Nashville to attend a convention for Discovery Toys, a product line I had sold out of my home for a few years. I had traveled there with my good friend, Lee Ann. Lee Ann had recruited and trained me, and we worked closely together as we moved up the ranks of the company. She was also a longtime member of the church that I had recently joined. A mentor in many ways, Lee Ann was a key go-to person when I had questions about work, parenting, or faith.

However, I had grown concerned about her. She had become quieter and seemed increasingly distant and distracted. Something was amiss.

*Laughing at my naïvete, she assured me that yes, discernment is open to everyone. She recommended several books about discernment and how to listen for God, including one called *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*, written by a group led by Suzanne Farnham.*

This was the backdrop as we ventured out to the Wildhorse Saloon in the late afternoon. Leaning against the bar rail with a beer in my hand, watching the mechanical bull spectacle, I thought it might be a suitable time to check in. I leaned toward her and asked, “Are you OK? You’ve seemed different over the past few weeks. Is something going on? Are you sick?”

She smiled gently. “I guess it is time to tell you. I have decided that I am going into discernment for the priesthood.”

I peered back. That phrase made no sense to me: “discernment for the priesthood.”

I was confused. “What does that mean, exactly? I have never heard that word. What is discernment?” She explained that she was trying to listen for God’s guidance to determine if she was being called by God to become an Episcopal priest.

Well, what a relief! I thought to myself.

Then I became intrigued. Questions bubbled up:

“Is this discernment open to everyone?”

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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.

Above all, spiritual discernment calls for deep prayerful listening and radical openness to the Spirit. – from Topic 1 of the Listening Hearts Primer on Spiritual Discernment, which can be found at: <https://listeninghearts.org/what-is-discernment>

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“What about discernment for those who don’t want to become a priest?”

“Can I ask God for guidance, too?”

“How will I hear the answers?”

Laughing at my naïvete, she assured me that, yes, discernment is open to everyone. She recommended several books about discernment and how to listen for God, including one called *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*, written by a group led by Suzanne Farnham. Today, that book is highlighted, underlined, and well-worn as it sits on my bookshelf. If you had told my young self that she would grow to be good friends with Suzanne, she would have been quite surprised!

That precious conversation in the middle of a Nashville bar would dramatically impact my life. Over time, discernment became for me a beloved practice of seeking to listen for God in all of life and helping others to do the same.

Article printed with permission from author Mabeth Hudson, who has written it to include in a book of her essays that she plans to publish.

Mabeth Hudson co-founded Well for the Journey, a Maryland non-profit that encourages spiritual well-being through innovative programming and resources. She serves as a leader and writer for Women at the Well and other programs. Mabeth has a law degree from Emory University and a Master’s Degree in spiritual care from Loyola University Maryland. She currently resides in Sparks, MD.