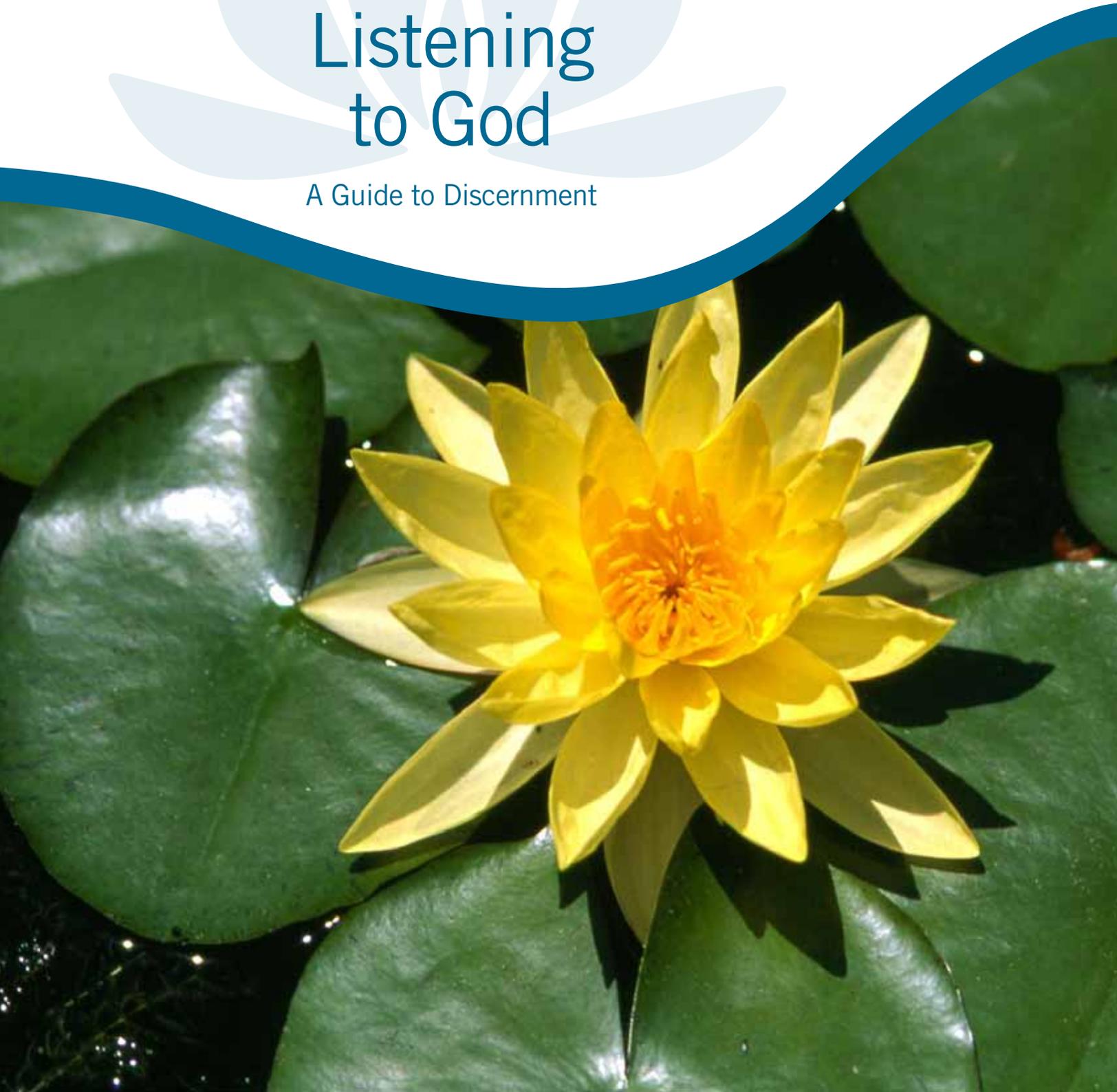




# Listening to God

A Guide to Discernment





### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Debra Farrington—an insightful writer and popular retreat leader—is the former publisher of Morehouse Publishing and the former manager of the Graduate Theological Union Bookstore in Berkeley, California. She is the author of *Hearing with the Heart: A Gentle Guide to Discerning God's Will for Your Life* and *Learning to Hear with the Heart: Meditations for Discerning God's Will*, as well as several other books of Christian spirituality. She has also written for a wide variety of publications including *The Lutheran*, *Spirituality and Health*, *Catholic Digest*, *Publishers Weekly*, and others.

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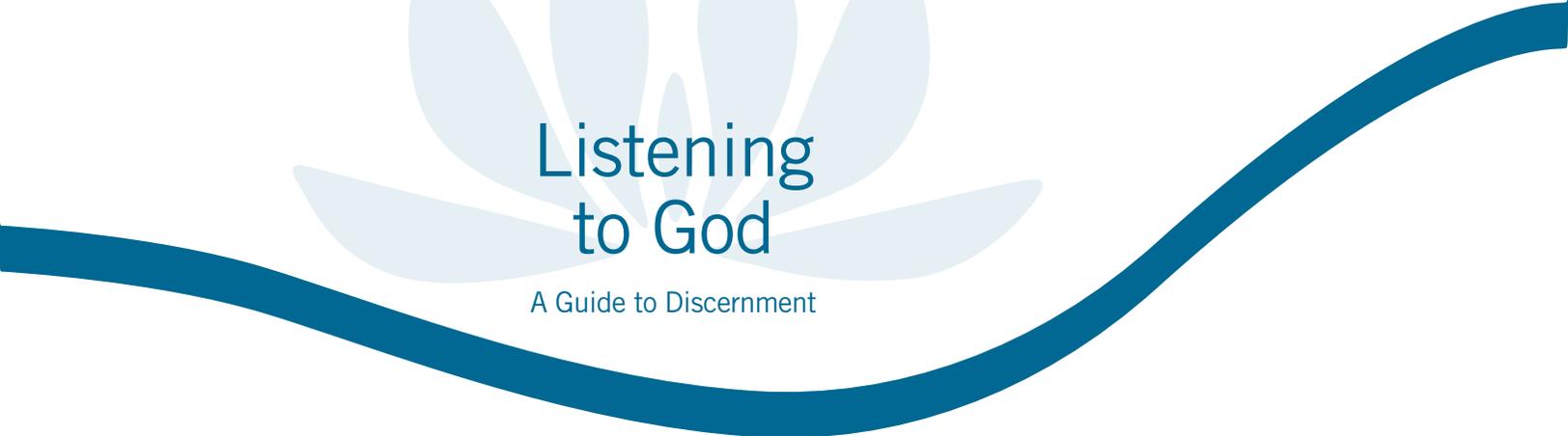
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## How to use this resource

These six sessions serve two purposes. First, they will introduce each woman in your group to some of the tools she needs as an individual for discerning God's hopes and desires for her life. Second, these same tools will be used to help the group as a whole to discern what their gifts are for ministry within your congregation or in your community.

This resource may be used as a congregational unit program, as part of a cluster or conference event, or as part of a synodical women's convention. The six sessions may be conducted over six weeks or over the course of a weekend, perhaps as a retreat.

The format is also flexible depending on the size of your group. For small groups, try shared leadership, giving all participants a copy of the entire resource. For larger groups, assign a facilitator for each session and allow the facilitators to decide how to conduct each session. Have copies of the handout ready when needed.

### TIME REQUIRED

1.5 hours per session.

The suggested times may be altered to meet the needs of your group.

This resource has been developed and excerpted from two other resources written by Debra Farrington: *Hearing with the Heart: A Gentle Guide to Discerning God's Will for Your Life*, and *Learning to Hear with the Heart: Meditations for Discerning God's Will*. Both books were published by Jossey-Bass, and these sessions were developed with their permission to use the materials within. Both of these books provide accessible and helpful information on discernment and would be useful companions to the material in this resource.

## Session One: Discernment and the Hearing Heart

This session introduces the concept of discernment and some of the skills needed for listening to God.

The session will last approximately 1 hour.  
**Materials needed:** paper and pens or pencils for anyone who wants to make notes of their observations

### STEPS FOR THE FACILITATOR

#### Welcome everyone to the session, and open the session with this prayer. (2 min)

*Almighty God, in whom we live and move and have our being, you have made us for yourself, so that our hearts are restless till they rest in you; grant us purity of heart and strength of purpose, that no passion may hinder us from knowing your will, no weakness from doing it; but in your light may we see clearly, and in your service find perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

— Augustine of Hippo

#### Read or summarize the following introduction. (2 min)

We're going to be exploring the concept of discerning God's will, a way of listening to God both individually and as a group within our own congregation. Each of us—as individuals and as groups—has different gifts, all of them valuable. In these sessions, we're going to walk through a process of discerning our own gifts as well as the gifts of our group, gifts that are uniquely suited to our place and time and that God hopes we will use well. But before we begin reading or hearing what others have to say about discernment, let's take a few moments to think about our own understanding of discernment.

#### Invite everyone to consider her own definition of discernment during a couple minutes of silence. After everyone has had a couple

#### minutes to consider this, open up the floor to conversation, using the following questions or others of your choosing. (10-15 min)

- How do you define discernment?
- What have been your own experiences with discernment in the past?

Allow at least 10 minutes for the conversation. If the group is large, you may wish to break into smaller groups so each person has a chance to share her thoughts.

#### Read or summarize the following introduction to what discernment is, after everyone has had a chance to share her thoughts. (5 min)

### DISCERNMENT

Solomon hadn't been the king for very long when God appeared to him in a dream one night. "Ask what I should give you," God said (1 Kings 3:5). Different versions of the Bible translate what Solomon requested as wisdom, or as an understanding mind or heart, but the actual translation of the Hebrew says that Solomon asked for a "hearing heart." In other words, Solomon wanted a heart that listened well, so he could discern well.

For the ancient Hebrews, the heart was more than an organ. The heart was thought to be the center of everything physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. So when Solomon asked for a hearing heart, what he wanted was for God to inform every aspect of his life so that he could be a wise and faithful king. Hearing hearts—listening hearts—are not reserved for kings alone. We too can ask for and receive the gift of a hearing heart so that we can discern well and judge rightly. And that's what this program will be about—learning to listen with our hearts so we can judge rightly.

You've probably heard the word "discernment" used primarily in relationship to a clergy person's call or vocation. Or perhaps you've heard people talk about discernment at a major crossroads in their lives. But God invites all of us to discernment, not only for big decisions but also for the whole of our lives, for the daily things as well as the big stuff.

The word "discern" comes from the Latin *discernere*, which means "to separate apart." From all the options in front of us, and from all the information that comes to us each day, we "separate apart" those things that seem to be God's unique call to us. So how we treat others, how we vote, how we use our time, talent, and money, and how we care for ourselves and the details these involve all require the practice of discernment. By learning to practice discernment in everyday life, we'll be far better equipped to hear God's guidance at any major crossroads we reach. We will develop some "muscle memory," just like athletes. They practice their skill over and over again, until the body does what they want it to do without their even having to think about it consciously. Discernment requires the same kind of practice. Doing it regularly, in the daily course of our lives, equips us to practice it under high-stress circumstances when we need to.

In this session and the next, we're going to look at four areas that help us to be better listeners: prayer, attention, study, and community.

**Stop for a moment or two and ask for any questions or comments so far. (5 min)**

**Read or summarize the following introduction to prayer. (2 min)**

## PRAYER

The hearing heart listens for God's voice prayerfully. The words we use in prayer are important and necessary in discernment, particularly when we are inviting God to speak about God's desires for us. But learning to listen—practicing silence and stillness—

in prayer is critical if we want to hear God's answer to that prayer.

Many people dislike silence. It makes us edgy. Not much seems to be happening. But with practice, maintaining stillness grows easier and richer. Like Elijah in 1 Kings 19, we often discover that God is not in the wind, fire, or earthquakes of our lives, but in the voice that comes in the quiet.

A prayerful and discerning heart also needs to let go of its own agenda and recognize that God's will might be different from ours. That doesn't mean we have to stop praying for others—far from it. God desires all our prayers, for ourselves and for others. But the hearing heart recognizes that it does not always know what God's will is and opens itself to accepting that fact. It gives up directing God and instead learns to listen for God's voice in prayer.

**Guide the group through the following exercise. (10 min)**

One way of practicing openness to God's will in prayer is to simply hold mental images of those you are concerned about, as well as yourself, in God's light without asking for anything. Try this:

- Sit in a comfortable position that supports your back and allows good blood circulation so that you can sit in silence for the next five or ten minutes.
- Take a few deep breaths and focus on relaxing your body and letting go of whatever to-do lists or other concerns are on your mind. If the to-do lists keep coming to mind, just let them know that they're important but that you'll get to them later.
- Find an image of God's love that works for you. That might be picturing God's love as a bright light or as God's open hand waiting to receive your concerns. Use whatever image suggests God's receptivity to you.
- Without asking for anything, name the people or situations that you wish to hold before God and imagine them being held in God's loving presence. You might see them wrapped in bright



light, for instance, or being cradled in God's hand. Hold them there for as long as you wish, and then move on to the next person or situation you wish to place before God.

- You can include all sorts of people and events in this exercise: individuals who are in need of help, countries where people are at war or starving, political situations, those suffering after a natural disaster, and even those who are experiencing great joys.
- Finally, hold yourself in God's presence without asking for anything in particular. If any thoughts, hopes, or wishes come to mind, make a mental note of them.
- When you are done, conclude with a brief, silent prayer of gratitude for God's loving presence in all of these situations.

**Invite the members of the group to discuss their experience with the previous exercise.**  
(15-20 Min)

**Questions for group discussion:**

- How did it feel to do this prayer exercise?
- Did you find it freeing or frustrating to not ask God for anything in particular?
- How did you feel about praying in this way for yourself?
- Did any hopes, desires, or wishes come to mind as you prayed for yourself or for others?
- How might this kind of prayer help you with daily discernment about the choices you face in your life, such as those surrounding career, relationships, family issues, or other personal concerns?

**When the conversation slows down, close the session by inviting everyone to rest in silence for a minute or two. Then read the following from Psalm 62:1–2.**

*For God alone my soul waits in silence;  
from him comes my salvation.*

*He alone is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress; I shall never be shaken.*

## Session Two: Paying Attention, Studying, and Discernment

In this session, we'll explore three other skills we need for daily discernment: attention, study, and spiritual companionship.

The session will last approximately 1 hour.

**Materials needed:** some objects from nature, at least one per person. These might be rocks, flowers, twigs, gourds, fruits, vegetables, and other similar things.

- paper and pens or pencils for each person

### STEPS FOR THE FACILITATOR

**Welcome everyone to the session, and then read or summarize the following material on attention.** (5 min)

#### ATTENTION

Many of us were taught as young children not to boast or to make ourselves the center of attention. Modesty is an important social skill, but sometimes we take it too far and forget to notice the unique gifts God gave us. Learning to pay attention to our gifts is essential if we want to discover the clues to God's desires for us, as individuals and as a group. Not being able to name and claim our gifts is a little like leaving a table full of wrapped presents from God on the table without opening them.

In Western culture we've also learned to ignore our bodies and what they have to tell us. Good discerners listen to the wisdom their bodies teach. Our bodies often know if a decision is right or wrong for us long before we know that intellectually. Shallow breathing or tension in your neck or jaw may be signs that you're on the wrong path. An overall feeling of well-being, deep breaths, and relaxed shoulders may be signs that you're more in alignment with God's desires for you.

Not all physical sensations are about discernment, of course. People catch germs, and people get sick, and many times that has nothing to do with being in or out of alignment with God. But when we're not dealing with a particular illness, sometimes these body reactions can be good teachers for us.

**Invite members of the group to share observations about how their own bodies communicate with them. What do they experience when they are stressed? What do they experience when they are relaxed and at peace?** (5-10 min)

**Invite the group to try the following exercise, the Prayer of Examen, as a way of paying attention to God in daily life.** (10-15 min)

#### PRAYER OF EXAMEN

Beginning to notice God's guidance and listening more consciously to it in daily life can be learned through the practice of the Prayer of Examen, an ancient Christian practice.

Begin by sitting in a comfortable position. Close your eyes, and breath naturally. Try to clear your mind of the day's concerns. (Allow a brief period of silence.)

Begin to look back over the activities of the last 24 hours, from what you were doing before you began this exercise to what you were doing this time yesterday. Think about the people you met, the things you did, the places you went, the conversations you had, and so on. (Give people a few minutes to do this.)

As you consider the things you did over the last day, look for those times when you felt you were responding to the world around you in a way that seems to be in accordance with God's hopes and



desires. Make a list of the things you did or said that seem consistent with God's will for you and for the world, no matter how inconsequential they may seem to you. (Give people a few minutes to do this.)

Now, make a second list of the times in the last 24 hours when you felt you were resisting God's desires for you, when you were moving away from God. If you wish, make some notes about what you feel may have caused you to move away from God—fear, anger, frustration, pain, or whatever. Take a few moments at the end of making this list to silently ask for God's forgiveness, and allow yourself to remember that God has mercy on us and loves us, even when we separate ourselves from God temporarily. (Give people a few minutes to make the list.)

Finally, sit quietly for a couple of minutes and listen for God's response to you, whether that comes as thoughts, emotions, or perhaps a physical sensation of peace, excitement, or something else.

**At the end of the practice, engage the group in a conversation around some of the following questions. (10 min)**

- Were you surprised at how often you felt and followed a sense of God's will for you over the last day?
- What things did you do or say that you might not have recognized at the time as responses to God's hopes for you, but in retrospect now seem to be responses to God?
- How did this kind of prayer increase your sense of conscious awareness of God's desires for you?
- What implications does this kind of prayer have for listening to God and responding to God in your daily life?
- Is there anything that someone wants or needs to share?

**Read or summarize this section on study. Then follow with the exercise. (10 min)**

**STUDY**

To be good discerners, we also need to learn more about God and how God works. When we don't read the Scriptures more fully, as well as other books that help us expand our childhood understandings of God, we're left with a God that is too small, too boxed in, to be a good partner in discernment. God works in more ways that we can imagine. If Moses hadn't been open to God working in all sorts of ways, he might not have recognized God in the burning bush. So we need to continue to expand our horizons, not only by reading but by looking for God's guidance in art, music, film, and even the objects and creatures in nature. God leaves clues about right living all over the place.

**EXERCISE**

Have some objects from nature in the room on a table where everyone can see them (e.g., flowers, twigs, rocks, leaves, gourds, fruits, vegetables, and the like.) Ask each person to select an object, take it to her seat or other comfortable place for about five minutes, and make a list of the things she might learn from that object. Everything God has created has something to teach us. (For example, a rock worn smooth might teach us about the process of life wearing us smooth; a rose might teach us that beauty and thorns exist in the same object; and so on.)

**Invite people to share what they might learn from the object they choose. (10 min)**

- How can we learn not only from books but from everything that exists?
- How can this expand our perspective and make us better discerners in our own lives?

**When the conversation winds down, close the session with this prayer.**

*May the strength of God pilot us,  
may the power of God preserve us,  
may the wisdom of God instruct us,  
may the hand of God protect us,  
may the way of God direct us,  
may the shield of God defend us,  
may the host of God guard us against  
    the snares of evil  
and the temptations of the world. Amen*

— St. Patrick

## Session Three: Recognizing the Roadblocks to Listening

This session will help participants begin to identify the obstacles that prevent us from listening to God and following God's will.

The session will last 45 minutes to an hour.

### Materials needed:

- paper and pens or pencils for those who want to make notes of their observations
- enough popular magazines and newspapers so that there is at least one for each person. (Select magazines that make women their primary audience: fashion, housekeeping, news, and others)
- a flip chart or large piece of paper and a marker

### STEPS FOR THE FACILITATOR

**Welcome everyone to this session and invite them to sit comfortably for a few moments in silence. During that silence, suggest that they try to let go of whatever to-do lists they are carrying around in their minds, and relax, focusing on just being present in this time and space. (5 min)**

**Read or summarize the following introduction to the session. (5 min)**

Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth-century saint, wrote a prayer that talks about how difficult it can be to listen for God. She wrote: "Although I have often abandoned you, O Lord, you have never abandoned me. Your hand of love is always outstretched toward me, even when I stubbornly look the other way. And your gentle voice constantly calls me, even when I obstinately refuse to listen."

Listening for God's voice and desires in our lives is hard work, so it's no surprise that we forget or neglect

to do that sometimes. It seems simpler to just make the decisions we need to make, to muddle along as best we can, rather than take the time to stop, listen, and wait until our hearts hear more clearly.

There are many obstacles to listening for God in our lives. Some of them come from our own unique life experiences, and others come from the culture around us. There are also times when we hear but aren't ready to respond. In this session, we'll look at one source of obstacles to listening and responding. Sometimes recognizing and naming the obstacles that keep us from working with God can help us be more attentive to God's hopes and desires for us.

**Introduce the following activity. Invite everyone to take one or two of the magazines or newspapers available and tear out five ads that appeal to them or that caught their attention. Ask each woman to list the product or service that each ad is promoting, as well as the benefit that the company is promoting. (20 min)**

For instance, a car company may be promoting a new model that will make you the envy of all your friends. A computer company might be promoting a computer that is so small and lightweight that you can take it anywhere and can work all the time.

**After everyone had made their lists, go around the room and invite each woman to share two or three (or more if you have time) of her ads and the benefits they are promoting.**

It may be helpful to make a list of the products and benefits on a large piece of paper or a flip chart so everyone can see it.

**Once you have this list, engage the group in conversation about what they see there, using the following questions or others of your choosing.**

(15-30 min)

- Are any of these benefits and values too far-fetched to be taken seriously?
- Are these benefits and values consistent with Scripture and with God's will?
- How are they consistent or inconsistent with what God asks of us?
- How does seeing ads like this in the media (television, radio, magazines, newspapers, online, billboards) affect people's ability to hear and follow God's will?
- Aside from the messages we get from the business world and media about what items, services, and values we should want, what other factors in our lives prevent us from hearing with our hearts?

**When the discussion is winding down, close the session with the following prayer.**

*Grant me, O Lord, to know what I ought to know, to love what I ought to love, to praise what delights you most, to value what is precious in your sight, to hate what is offensive to you. Do not allow me to judge according to the sight of my eyes, nor to pass sentence according to the hearing of my ears; but to discern with a true judgment between things visible and spiritual, and above all things, always to inquire what is the good pleasure of your will.*

— Thomas à Kempis

## Session Four: We Are Co-creators with God

This session explores the concept of being a co-creator with God and how we can do that in our own lives and in our congregations.

The session will last approximately 1 hour.

### Materials needed:

- paper and pens or pencils
- handout (see page 21)

### STEPS FOR THE FACILITATOR

#### Welcome everyone to the group, and open the session with this prayer. (5 min)

*Lord, help us today to realize that you will be speaking to us through the events of the day, through people, through things, and through all creation. Give us ears, eyes, and hearts to perceive you, however veiled your presence may be. Give us insight to see through the exterior of things to the interior truth. Give us your Spirit of discernment. O Lord, you know how busy we must be this day. If we forget you, do not forget us. Amen.*

— Sir Jacob Astley (1579-1652), adapted

#### Read or summarize the following introduction. (5 min)

Talk about discernment often seems to imply that it is always about life's big decisions—like marriage, career, children—and it is. But we don't need to save discernment just for those big situations. How and when to pray; how to treat others; how to nurture friendships, our spiritual lives, our employees and colleagues; how to vote; how to help those in our communities who have few resources; and how to spend the money we have are all activities and decisions that benefit from listening for God's hopes and desires. In this way, each of us is called to be a partner, or co-creator, with God in building up our world.

Perhaps it seems prideful to think that you have a role to play in bringing about the kind of world that God truly desires. But you bear no more and no less responsibility than every other living being in the world. God desires that we all play our part in helping to build the world God desires. Just as we want what is best for our children, our partners, and our close friends, God wants what is best for everyone in the world and asks our help in making this a reality. So each of us must take responsibility for listening for God's guidance and acting on that guidance.

The evening news once featured a story about the wind being able to bring dust from Africa to Colorado. No country or people can isolate themselves as easily as they might think. Acting, or not acting, on God's behalf works much the same way. When we do something hateful, hurtful, and cruel to someone else, that act, or the spirit of it, spreads from the victim to someone else—and it ripples outward like the waves made by a stone thrown in a pond. When we practice kindness, concern, and graciousness, the same is true. It spreads to others. Each act is just a small thing, but those acts can either further God's will or help to defeat it. By acting as God would have us act, we become God's hands, feet, and voices.

#### Read the following quote to the group and ask for their comments. (10 min)

Catholic priest William Barry says that when we give up trying to help and write off the possibilities of our being co-creator with God as naïve, doing so “sanctions the status quo of mistrust and enmity between people whom God wants to be brothers and sisters, and it takes us off the hook of trying to find ways to live out God's dream.” (William A. Barry, *Paying Attention to God: Discernment in Prayer*. Notre Dame: Indiana, 1990, page 60.)

**Questions for discussion:**

- Do you agree with Barry that we must find ways to be co-creators with God?
- In what ways have you seen yourself, our nation, or other people or groups ignore God's desires and by doing so become the gateway to mistrust and hatred among people?
- How do you feel about being responsible for being a co-creator with God?

**Read or summarize the following material.**  
(5 min)

[Note: Some people in your group may already have worked on recognizing or naming their gifts in an earlier program. You may also have people in your group for whom this material will be new. In the next section, help those who were not a part of earlier discussions about gifts to “catch up” with others who have already thought about this. And encourage those who may have thought about their gifts in previous years to be open to re-thinking those—they may have changed some. Focus as well on the differences between skills and gifts, which will be explored here and is likely to be new material for everyone.]

**GIFTS AND SKILLS**

One of the ways in which we can respond as co-creators is by recognizing the gifts that God gave us to work with. We've all heard about gifts in the church. The New Testament is full of references to the many gifts that God has given us to use. But what we don't always think about is the difference between gifts and skills.

The use of our natural or inborn gifts—whatever they may be—engage our joy, creativity, and energy. Skills, on the other hand, are learned and deliberately developed. Skills, like gifts, can be absolutely anything, since one person's skill could be another person's gift. One woman may find working with numbers to be an innate gift that she really

enjoys, while another woman finds that she is good at working with numbers, but it bores her. For the first woman, working with numbers is a gift; for the second, it is a skill.

Our inner resources can become drained when we exercise our skills too often; our internal reservoirs get emptied. But when we use our gifts more than our skills, we feel alive and energized; our inner resources seem boundless and constantly refilled. When we use our gifts more than our skills, we don't burn out easily because in using our gifts, we are following God's call. We are gratefully using the gifts given us by God to be who we are called to be, rather than trying to be something that we are not.

**Invite the group to be silent for a little while and make individual lists of things they consider their gifts, and things that seem more like skills to them.** (5 min)**After they have completed this, ask them to gather in small groups of two to four people and follow the instructions below, also found on the handout. You may either write these instructions on paper for everyone to see, or make copies of the handout to give to each member of the group.** (20 min)

- If you are willing, read your list of gifts and skills to the group.
- Ask others in the group to add to your list any gifts they have noticed.
- After each woman has had a chance to read her list and get feedback from the others, discuss how using your gifts makes you feel versus using your skills. What are the similarities and differences?
- How can you use your gifts more often than your skills in your own life?

**Bring the groups back together, and ask for any general observations that people wish to share.** (10 min)

**Close the session with a few moments of silence, followed by this prayer.**

*God be in our heads,  
and in our understanding;*

*God be in our eyes, and in our looking;*

*God be in our mouths, and in our speaking;*

*God be in our hearts, and in our thinking;*

*God be at our ends, and at our departing.*

— Amen

Note: Remind participants that they will need to bring their lists of gifts and skills to the next session.

## Session Five: Using Our Gifts in the World

This session will help each woman see that her gifts are an invitation from God to participate in the world and help co-create. The material in this session will help each individual woman explore how using her gifts and skills benefits not only herself but those around her.

The session will last approximately 1 hour.  
**Materials needed:** paper and pens or pencils for each member of the group

### STEPS FOR THE FACILITATOR

#### Open with prayer.

*O thou full of compassion,  
 I commit and commend myself unto thee,  
 in whom I am,  
 and live,  
 and know.*

*Be thou the goal of my pilgrimage,  
 and my rest along the way. Amen*

— St. Augustine

#### Read or summarize the following. (5 min)

In the last session, we spent some time looking at our gifts as clues to what God may want us to be and do in this world. Today we'll add a twist to the recognition of our gifts, and that is that these gifts weren't given to us just for our own enjoyment and use.

Frederick Buechner, a popular writer on spirituality and a Presbyterian minister, wrote about vocation in one of his books, *Wishful Thinking*. Vocation—which is something that each person has, not just clergy—is about figuring out what God's deepest hopes and desires are for us. Buechner tells us that we can be more sure that we're on the right track when the work that we feel called to do meets a need that others around us, in our communities or in the world in general, need to have done. He writes, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet"

(Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper San Francisco, 1973, pp. 118-119).

In this session, you're invited to think about the gifts we named in the last session and consider how those gifts speak not only to your own needs but to the needs of others in your family, communities, and world.

#### Ask each woman to look at her list of gifts, which she wrote down during the last session, and note one or more ways in which each of her gifts benefits someone else. (5-10 min.)

Encourage them to be creative in their thinking on this: Someone who has a gift for gardening, for instance, may be helping to beautify the neighborhood, making it a nicer place to live. She may also be beautifying her own home through gardening or bringing pleasure to the homebound or the ill by bringing them flowers. She may be teaching her children or others in the neighborhood a love of gardening, or nature, and a respect for creation.

#### Ask people to get in groups of two or three and share whatever portion of their lists they are willing to share. (10-15 min)

Ask the members of each group to add other ways in which they see each woman's gift being of value to others, if they think of something the speaker hasn't mentioned. If someone has a gift that she doesn't see as being of value to anyone else, encourage the group to help her explore how that gift may really be a benefit to others.

The point of this exercise is to recognize how much we each have to contribute to the world around us, to really claim the value of our gifts and be affirmed in that by others.

**Gather the entire group back together again, and ask for general observations. (10 min)**

- Were people surprised by anything in doing this exercise?
- Do they see themselves and their gifts differently now than they did previously?

**Read or summarize the following. (5 min)**

Often what surfaces when we're looking at our gifts are some of our heart's deepest desires. Maybe that's why looking at our gifts is scary for some of us. It's so easy to tell others to go after their dreams, something you see God calling them to be or do. Some of you probably found that to be true in talking about each other's gifts. Seeing someone else's deepest desire is often easier than seeing—and acting on—your own. Somehow, our hearts close down when we desire something that seems fanciful, impractical, or unobtainable. The voice of reason takes over and closes down our discerning heart.

"With God all things are possible" makes a great slogan, but it's hard to actually believe it and trust in it. Still, what if God's invitations to us come wrapped up in the guise of our heart's deepest desires? What if the desire itself was planted in our hearts just so we would take notice and do something about it? What if God keeps fueling that desire until we accept the gift in it?

**Invite each woman to sit in silence for a minute and reflect on any deep desires that have surfaced while reflecting on her gifts and how they help others. (5-10 min)**

Ask each person to reflect on whether or not those desires may be God speaking to her about God's hopes and will for her. Some in the group may wish to simply think about this, while others may find it helpful to write about it.

**Invite anyone in the group who would like to share a bit of their reflection to do so. (10 min)**

**Close with prayer.**

*Lord, grant us eyes to see*

*Within the seed a tree,*

*Within the glowing egg a bird,*

*Within the shroud a butterfly:*

*Till taught by such, we see*

*Beyond all creatures thee,*

*And hearken for thy tender word*

*And hear it, "Fear not: it is I."*

— Christina Rossetti

## Session Six: Listening to God's Hopes for Us

In this session, we'll tie together many of the pieces of previous sessions and help the group to name and claim their collective gifts to their congregation and community.

The session will last approximately 1 hour.

### Materials needed:

- flip chart, large paper, or chalkboard to write on so that all can see what is being written
- paper and pens or pencils for each member of the group

### STEPS FOR THE FACILITATOR

**Welcome everyone to the session and invite them to spend a couple minutes in silence to get focused. Then begin the session with this prayer from Teresa of Avila.** (5 min)

*Christ has no body now on earth but yours;*

*yours are the only hands with which he can do his work, yours are the only feet with which he can go about the world.*

*Yours are the only eyes through which his compassion can shine forth upon a troubled world.*

*Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

### Read or summarize the following.

In this session, we're going to explore what gifts we have as a group and how those gifts can be used here to glorify God and help bring about God's hopes and desires for this community.

**Ask the participants to gather in small groups, about 3 to 5 people per group, and come up with a list of the gifts that the entire, larger group (as a group, not individuals) brings to your congregation.** (10 min)

Have them consider how individual people's gifts interact, combine with, and complement one another. Together, do they make something bigger? Ask them

to make a list of at least 3-5 gifts the group brings.

**When the small groups are done, gather the entire group back together and ask each small group to report on the gifts that they see the larger group bringing to the congregation.** (10-15 min)

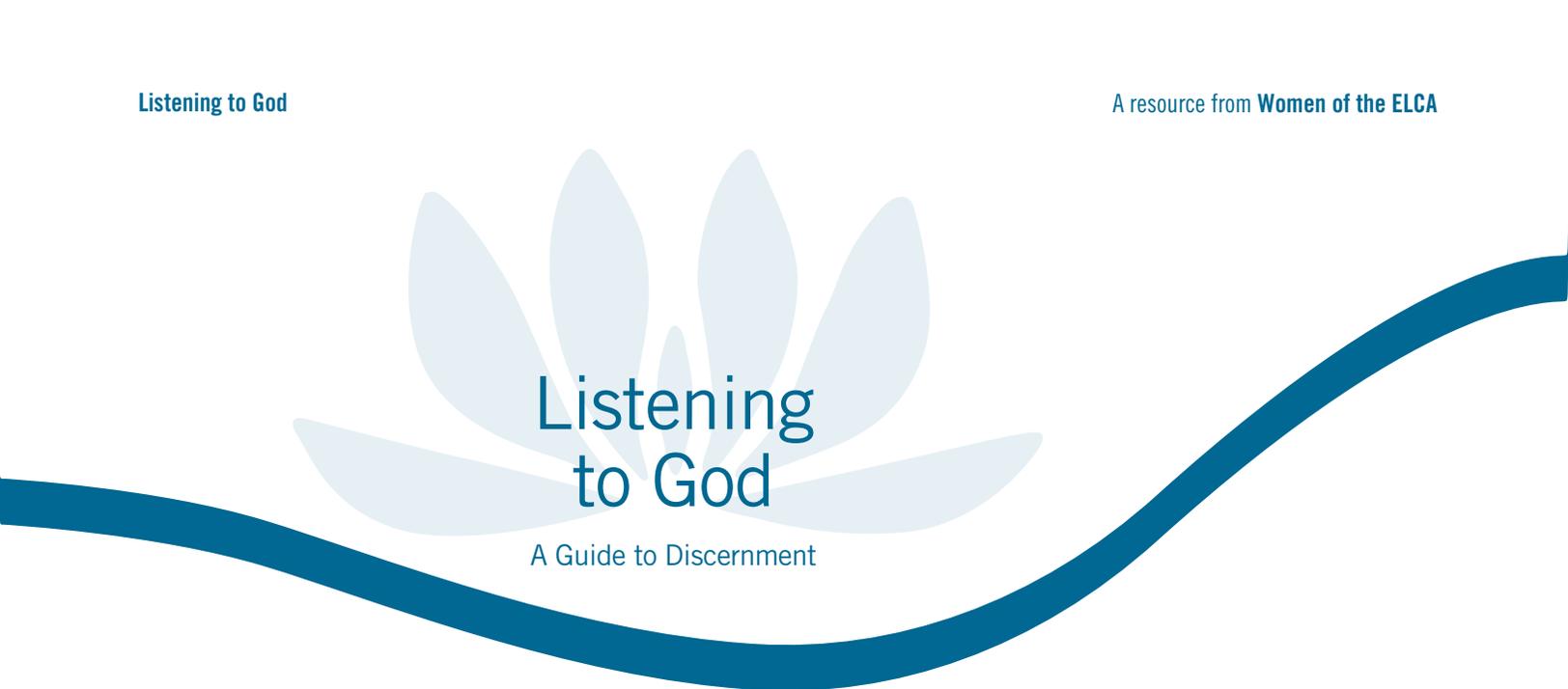
As the reports are made, write the gifts on newsprint or on something large enough for everyone to see. If more than one group names the same gift, put a checkmark or star next to it for each group that named it so that you can see how many groups noticed the same gift.

**Put up another piece of newsprint, or write on a blackboard or some other surface that everyone can see. Invite the whole group to look at the gifts most often named by the smaller groups. Taking one gift at a time, brainstorm ways in which they might use that gift for the benefit of the congregation or community.** (15 min)

Remind everyone that brainstorming is not decision-making, and that all suggestions are written down and considered. Write all the suggestions on the newsprint, so that everyone can see them and so you have a record of the ideas that surfaced.

**Thank everyone for the wonderful ideas, and indicate how these suggestions might be incorporated into future planning for your group or form the basis for a ministry plan. Close with this prayer from George Herbert.**

*Teach me, my God and King  
In all things thee to see,  
And what I do in anything,  
To do it as for thee.*



# Listening to God

A Guide to Discernment

## Handout: Session Four

### **INSTRUCTIONS AND QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS:**

- If you are willing, read your list of gifts and skills to the group.
- Ask others in the group to add to your list any gifts they have noticed.
- After each woman has had a chance to read her list and get feedback from the others, discuss how using your gifts makes you feel versus using your skills. What are the similarities and differences?
- How can you use your gifts more often than your skills in your own life?

For a more detailed exploration of gifts, see chapter four in *Hearing with the Heart: A Gentle Guide to Discerning God's Will for Your Life*, by Debra Farrington, published by Jossey-Bass, 2003.