

The Practice of Discernment

Session Focus

Life is full of choices. Sometimes these choices are momentous: deciding on a career path, choosing a marriage partner, having children, or retiring from full-time work. Other choices are not quite as momentous, but they are important nonetheless because they give shape to our life: moving to another place for a new job, pursuing further education, finding a new church, caring for aging parents—all these decisions shape who we are and who we are becoming.

How do you make decisions? How do you make decisions as a household? Do you mull over the choices alone? Do you gather your family or a group of trusted friends together to test the best responses? What role does God play in your discernment? How do you figure out what God wants you to do? How do your religious beliefs contribute to your decision-making process?

Session Activities

There are seven activities on the Practice of Discernment that include a teaching plan and the activity. All of the activities are also included on a separate MS Word document so that you can create handouts for sessions, a digital or print booklet, online playlists and activities, social media posts, and more.

- Activity 1. Stories of Discernment
- Activity 2. Decisions You Have Made
- Activity 3. Jesus and Discernment
- Activity 4. The Christian Practice of Discernment
- Activity 5. Ways to Live the Christian Practice of Discernment
- Activity 6. Practicing Discernment Daily: Paying Attention to God
- Activity 7. Prayers for Discernment

Children Activities

There are four children's activities that can be used in a children's program and family activities. They can be found at the end of this guide and online as a separate file.

1. Making Decisions
2. Jesus Makes Good Decisions
3. Try It!—Making Good Decisions #1
4. Try It!—Making Good Decisions #2

A Learning Process for Christian Practices

The dynamic of forming people of all ages in a Christian practice incorporates four movements, which become the template for designing Christian practices learning programs.

Movement 1. Reflecting on Our Lives

The first movement, *Reflecting*, taps into a basic area of human need that can find meaning and purpose in a Christian practice. Reflecting gives people an opportunity to become aware of how they experience a basic human need and hunger for the Christian practice in their own life. Reflecting also provides space for people to become aware of how they already engage in this practice, and the things that distort or hinder the practice.

Oftentimes this first movement begins with real-life stories (presentations, print, audio, and/or video) of people who seek meaning and purpose for their lives through a particular practice. This helps spark people's reflection and storytelling.

Movement 2. Exploring the Christian Practice

The second movement, *Exploring*, grounds the Christian practice in the Bible by describing how the biblical story deepens our understanding of the Christian practice and connects to people's human needs and hungers. We present the wisdom of the Christian tradition on a particular Christian practice, describing what people today, and throughout history, actually do when they are engaged well in a particular practice—how people or communities live the practice with exceptional grace and skill. By connecting the Christian practice to human needs and hungers, people can identify how and why a practice is important to living a meaningful life.

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice

The third movement, *Experiencing*, immerses people in the actual practice—opportunities to experience activities that lead them into the Christian practice. This immersion can take place in programs, within the life of the Christian community (such as worship and ministry activities), and/or out in the community (serving people, providing hospitality, etc.). The key is that people actually experience the practice.

Movement 4. Living the Practice

The fourth movement, *Living*, includes reflecting on the experience of the practice activities (Movement 3); showing people how to make the Christian practice a part of everyday life; and providing people with a variety of tools and activities to integrate the Christian practice into their daily life—at home, at work, at school, and in the world.

Learning Activities through the Four Movements

Movement 1. Reflecting on Life Experience

- Activity 1. Stories of Discernment
- Activity 2. Decisions You Have Made

Movement 2. Exploring the Christian Practice

- Activity 3. Jesus and Discernment
- Activity 4. The Christian Practice of Discernment

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice

Activity 5. Ways to Live the Christian Practice of Discernment

Movement 4. Living the Practice

Activity 6. Practicing Discernment Daily: Paying Attention to God

Activity 7. Prayers for Discernment

Session Plan

Intergenerational Design: Whole Group with Age-Appropriate Table Groups

This session works best with the whole group in the same room and a presentation/facilitation team that guides people through the activities in age-appropriate table groups. Guide the table groups through each of the activities at the same time.

- Organize people into table groups based on age groupings: families with children (grades 1-5), middle school adolescents, high school adolescents, young adults, and adults.
- The lead facilitator guides the entire group through each of the learning experiences. All presentations and activity instructions are given to the whole group.
- The age-appropriate learning activities within each learning experience are conducted in table groups. Give them all the handouts and learning materials needed for the learning experiences.
- Where needed, small group leaders facilitate the work of the table groups.

Part 1. (5 minutes) Gathering & Opening Prayer

- Open the session with a short prayer (see Activity 7).

Part 2. (20-25 minutes) All Ages Learning: Decisions We Have Made

- Distribute the handouts for Activity 1 and 2 to each youth and adult table group, and to the parents. Distribute **Making Decisions** to the children or families with children table groups.

Share with the group one or more of the five stories about discernment and making choices. Find a children's story (or storybook) of your choosing that talks about making choices. Use a different reader for each story. Distribute the **Stories of Discernment** handout if you choose.

- Using the **Decisions You Have Made** handout and the **Making Decisions** handout for children, guide the participants in reflecting on their experience of making decisions. Families work together on this activity with children using the handout, **Making Decisions**, while their parents reflect on their own experience of making decisions. (Note: Tell people that they will not be sharing the content of their responses to the four questions.)

In groups ask the participants to share insights they gained from completing the four questions. Give everyone a chance to share their insights before any discussion.

When each group has finished their sharing, ask the participants to identify the key ingredients

for making good decisions. Invite one person from each group to report on the types of decisions that people have had to make in the past year.

Part 3. (90 minutes) In Depth Learning Experience: The Christian Practice of Discernment

- Distribute the handouts for Activity 3, 4, and 5 to each youth and adult table group, and to the parents. Distribute **Jesus Makes Good Decisions**, and **Try It—Making Good Decisions I and II** . to the children or families with children table groups.
- Use Activity 3, **Jesus and Discernment**, and the story the “Temptation of Jesus” in Luke 4:1-13 to create a drama to illustrate how Jesus needed to engage in decision-making and discernment throughout his life. Prepare the dramatization in advance. Instead of the dramatization, you can create a video or PowerPoint presentation with photos illustrating the temptations Jesus experienced in Luke 4:1-13, using contemporary examples of the temptations of power, prestige and status, and money. Have a narrator read the Gospel story as you present the images. You can have actors read the parts of Jesus and Satan.

Children or families with children groups can use the handout, **Jesus Makes Good Decisions**.

- **Optional Activity:** Use Activity 4, **The Christian Practice of Discernment**, to present a brief explanation of the four building blocks of discernment. Include examples appropriate for children and youth. (You can also select four people who will each read one of the Scripture passages as part of your presentation.) Conclude your presentation with table group discussions. There are four building blocks of discernment include: Believe in the Goodness of God, Believe that Love is Our Primary Calling, Believe that God Communicates with Us, and Believe in Life.
- Use Activity 5, **Ways to Live the Christian Practice of Discernment**, to introduce the participants to the process of discernment with several demonstrations of the process in action. There are several ways to conduct a demonstration of the discernment process. It is important to have examples that are suitable for your participants, e.g. a family example, a teenage example, a young adult example, an adult example, etc.

Children (and families with children) can use the handout, **Try It—Making Good Decisions I and II** .

- To help the participants envision ways to use the discernment process in their lives ask them to review the two decisions they identified in Activity 2. Decisions You Have Made—the wise decision and the one they regret. Have them analyze the two decisions using the 10 “steps” in the discernment process. If a family is analyzing a “children’s decision” that can use the children’s handout, **Try It—Making Good Decisions**.

Part 4. (15 minutes) Applying the Learning: Practicing Discernment Daily

- Distribute the handouts for Activity 6, **Practicing Discernment Daily: Paying Attention to God**, to each group.
- Use Activity 6, **Practicing Discernment Daily: Paying Attention to God**, to introduce people to the Prayer of Examen and then lead them through the process as a group. You can adapt the process for children or the short children's version of the examen which is included. The Prayer of Examen helps us look for traces of God's actions in our daily life, individually or as a household. It is usually done in the evening, looking back over the day, or it can be done as a household at the evening meal. This is a time of quiet to spend alone or with each other in the presence of God.

Part 5. (5 minutes) Closing Prayer

- Close with a short prayer (see Activity 7).

Materials Needed

Check each activity for the materials that are needed.

Visual Faith Bible Activities on Discernment

(Go to: <https://www.vibrantfaithprojects.org/visual-faith-activities.html>)

Pulled in Different Directions (#8). This Visual Faith Exercise is based on Luke 4:1-13 and designed to help participants learn the importance of staying connected to God in the midst of tough decisions.

You can purchase images through Vibrant Faith (<https://vibrantfaith.org/product/vfp-image-database>) or use copyright-free photo websites, such as Unsplash (<https://unsplash.com>) and Pixabay (<https://pixabay.com>).

Activity 1. Stories of Discernment

Plan

Introduce the Activity with these words:

Life is full of choices. Sometimes these choices are momentous: deciding on a career path, choosing a marriage partner, having children, or retiring from full-time work. Other choices are not quite as momentous, but they are important nonetheless because they give shape to our life: moving to another place for a new job, pursuing further education, finding a new church, caring for aging parents—all these decisions shape who we are and who we are becoming.

Share with the group the five stories about discernment and making choices. Use a different reader for each story.

Invite the participants to think back over the past year and recall issues or struggles at home, work, or school that required them to make an important decision. Give the individuals and families time to think about examples and then ask them to share their examples at table groups.

Activity

Life is full of choices. Sometimes these choices are momentous: deciding on a career path, choosing a marriage partner, having children, or retiring from full-time work. Other choices are not quite as momentous, but they are important nonetheless because they give shape to our life: moving to another place for a new job, pursuing further education, finding a new church, caring for aging parents—all these decisions shape who we are and who we are becoming.

Janet, a geologist, has been offered a high-paying job with an oil company in a southern state, far from her northeastern home. She has also been offered a job with the United States government that would pay less but be more enjoyable work. This job would give her an opportunity to make a difference by developing environmental practices that could be written into law—and it would be located closer to her present home. Like so many college graduates today, Janet is overwhelmed by student loans and the implications of long-term debt for buying a home or a car or even just taking a vacation. Which job offer should she accept?

Tim and Wendy have just returned from their church's annual mission trip, where they fell in love with a little Guatemalan orphan, Isabelita, age seven. Their own children, seventeen and twenty, will soon be on their own. They begin to discuss adopting, trying to weigh their own desires against Isabelita's needs. Is it better to assist Isabelita from afar so that she remains in her own culture, or to bring her to the United States and raise her?

Tom, a widower with grown children, retired a few months ago from his job as an estimator for an international plumbing and steam-fitting business. He appreciates that he no longer feels as exhausted as in the past five years, and he certainly does not miss the intensity of his former lifestyle. Yet he is beginning to find his days stretching before him with little to occupy his time and energy. He realizes that he must find something worthwhile to fill his time, but what?

Anne lives 1300 miles away from her aging parents. The last time she lived less than 100 miles from her parents, she was 18. Over the past year she has begun to realize that her parents are not able to keep up their home, the house they moved into when she was 3 months old. The house, their ailments, and all their other responsibilities are beginning to overwhelm them. Slowly her parents are recognizing that it is time to sell the house and begin a new life in a new setting. Anne feels a responsibility to be involved in this next stage of her parent's life. Should they come to live with Anne and her family? Should they move into assisted living? How should she care for her parents?

Jessica is gifted in the arts—dancing, singing and acting—and wants to pursue her dream in college. Her parents are concerned about the family's financial situation and want Jessica to graduate college with as little debt as possible, prepared to enter a career that would pay the bills. Her parents' hopes were tested when Jessica informed them she is turning down a full scholarship to a local college for a much smaller scholarship at a college where she could pursue a vocal performance major. It's hard for them to see a "marketable income" for a performance major. What should they do and say?

- ◆ Think back over the past year and recall the times at home, work, or school that you needed to make an important decision.

Activity 2. Decisions You Have Made

Plan

To help the participants reflect on their experience of making decisions, give them a copy of the worksheet, *Making Life Choices*, and ask them to complete the questions. Families can choose to work together on this activity. Children can use the children's version on the handout, *Making Decisions*, while their parents reflect on their own experience of making decisions. (Note: Tell people that they will not be sharing the content of their responses to the four questions.)

Take a few moments to reflect on decisions you have made using the worksheet.

1. Recall a decision that in retrospect was a wise one. How did you make it? What factors did you weigh? With whom did you consult? How did you manage opposing points of view? What would have been the consequences if you had made a different decision? Where was God in this decision?
2. Recall a decision you made that you now regret. What was the process by which you made that decision? Have you since discovered clues about how you could have decided differently? Where was God in this decision?
3. Make a short list of persons you might call when you are faced with a tough decision. What do you look for from these persons? How do they help you?
4. When you think about the major decisions you have made in your life, how have your religious or spiritual values influenced your decisions?

In groups ask the participants to share insights they gained from completing the four questions. Give everyone a chance to share their insights before any discussion.

What did they learn about making decisions and the process of discernment from their responses to the four questions?

When each group has finished their sharing, ask the participants to identify the key ingredients for making good decisions. Invite one person from each group to report on the types of decisions that people have had to make in the past year.

Making Life Choices

How do you make decisions? How do you make decisions as a household? Do you mull over the choices alone? Do you gather your family or a group of trusted friends together to test the best responses? What role does God play in your discernment? How do you figure out what God wants you to do? How do your religious beliefs contribute to your decision-making process?

◆ **Recall a decision that in retrospect was a wise one.**

- How did you make it?
- What factors did you weigh?
- With whom did you consult? How did you manage opposing points of view?
- What would have been the consequences if you had made a different decision?
- Where was God in this decision?

◆ **Recall a decision you made that you now regret.**

- What was the process by which you made that decision?
- Have you since discovered clues about how you could have decided differently?
- Where was God in this decision?

◆ **Make a short list of persons you might call when you are faced with a tough decision. What do you look for from these persons? How do they help you?**

◆ **When you think about the major decisions you have made in your life, how have your religious or spiritual values influenced your decisions?**

Activity 3. Jesus and Discernment

Plan

Use the “Temptation of Jesus” in Luke 4:1-13 to create a drama to illustrate how Jesus needed to engage in decision-making and discernment throughout his life. Prepare the dramatization in advance. Here are several suggestions:

1. Select a narrator to read the non-speaker parts of the Gospel story.
2. Select a person to role play Jesus and three people for the Satan role—one for each temptation. Give each actor a copy of the Scripture passage and highlight the lines each actor is going to recite.
3. Create or find contemporary props that illustrate each temptation (e.g., lots of food, the world’s possessions/money, etc.). Have a crew ready to bring out temptations at the appropriate time.
4. Rehearse the actions as a group.
5. Present the drama.

Alternative

Instead of the dramatization, you can create a video or PowerPoint presentation with photos illustrating the temptations Jesus experienced in Luke 4:1-13, using contemporary examples of the temptations of power, prestige and status, and money. Have a narrator read the Gospel story as you present the images. You can have actors read the parts of Jesus and Satan.

After the drama (or presentation) share with the group the following reflection.

The story of Jesus’ temptation in the desert is an exercise in discernment. Jesus recognizes the temptations for what they are: invitations to satisfy what one hungers for, to be admired, even worshiped, by people, and to own all imaginable goods. The spirit of these temptations runs counter to the Spirit of God in the life of Jesus. This wilderness scene gives us a vivid image of the discrimination involved in discernment. We need to pay attention, to look deep into our lives and sort out the various motivations for our thoughts and actions. Of the many inner and outer voices that prompt us, which will we heed?

Ask the participants in small groups to discuss the following question: *What are the things that distract us (“tempt us”) from making good choices?*

After a few minutes, ask one person from each group to report on the types of decisions that people have had to make in the past year.

Activity

Jesus returned from the Jordan full of the Holy Spirit and was led by the Spirit into the desert, where he was tempted by the Devil for forty days. In all that time he ate nothing, so that he was hungry when it was over.

The Devil said to him, "If you are God's Son, order these stones to turn into bread." But Jesus answered, "The scripture says, 'Human beings cannot live on bread alone.'"

Then the Devil took him up and showed him in a second all the kingdoms of the world. "I will give you all this power and all this wealth," the Devil told him. "It has all been handed over to me, and I can give it to anyone I choose. All this will be yours, then, if you worship me." Jesus answered, "The scripture says, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him!'"

Then the Devil took him to Jerusalem and set him on the highest point of the Temple, and said to him, "If you are God's Son, throw yourself down from here. For the scripture says, 'God will order his angels to take good care of you.' It also says, 'They will hold you up with their hands, so that not even your feet will be hurt on the stones.'" But Jesus answered, "The scripture says, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

When the Devil finished tempting Jesus in every way, he left him for a while. (Luke 4:1–13)

The story of Jesus' temptation in the desert is an exercise in discernment. Jesus recognizes the temptations for what they are: invitations to satisfy what one hungers for, to be admired, even worshiped, by people, and to own all imaginable goods. The spirit of these temptations runs counter to the Spirit of God in the life of Jesus. This wilderness scene gives us a vivid image of the discrimination involved in discernment. We need to pay attention, to look deep into our lives and sort out the various motivations for our thoughts and actions. Of the many inner and outer voices that prompt us, which will we heed?

Activity 4. The Christian Practice of Discernment

Plan

Develop a presentation that explains each building block using the Scripture reading and the key points in the commentary. Select four people who will each read one of the Scripture passages as part of your presentation.

Conclude your presentation with table group discussions using the following questions. Give each person/household an opportunity to think about the questions and then invite people to share their responses.

- ◆ What insights about making decisions and discernment did you gain from the four building blocks?
- ◆ How could you apply these building blocks to making decisions as an individual and/or household?

Activity

The word “discernment” comes from the Latin word *discernere*, which means to distinguish, to sift out, to separate that which may be from God from all the other influences in our lives, good or bad. Discernment opens us up to listen to and recognize the voice and patterns of God’s direction in our lives.

The Christian tradition has long recognized the importance of discernment. Because our identity is formed in part through our decisions, the making of decisions is actually a privileged moment for growing in discipleship. Through our choices, we can become the person God is calling us to be.

Because our decisions are so central to our identity as persons and as Christians, we can look to the Christian tradition for help in the process of decision-making. That help is called “discernment.” The Latin root of the verb “to discern” means to discriminate. Thus, in the Christian spiritual tradition, discernment refers to the process of discriminating between that which expresses God’s call and anything that runs counter to it—in other words, sifting out what is of God and what is not.

Christians have been discerning from biblical times to the present, seeking to respond to God’s call within their personal prayer and the formal worship of the gathered faith community, in their moral choices, or simply in the ebb and flow of ordinary life. Whenever we seek to answer such questions as “How is God present here?” “How can I know what God is calling me to do?” “Is this just me, or is this really God?” or “Is God calling us to go forward with our plan?” we are engaging in discernment.

Discernment, then, is the process of intentionally becoming aware of how God is present, active, and calling us as individuals and communities so that we can respond with increasingly greater faithfulness. (Adapted from *The Art of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision-Making* by Elizabeth Liebert)

There are four building blocks of discernment:

- ◆ Believe in the Goodness of God (Psalm 139:1-6)

- ◆ Believe that Love is Our Primary Calling (Mark 12:28-31)
- ◆ Believe that God Communicates with Us (John 14:16-17, 26)
- ◆ Believe in Life (Deuteronomy 30:15-16, 19)

Believe in the Goodness of God

*Lord, you have examined me and you know me.
 You know everything I do;
 from far away you understand all my thoughts.
 You see me, whether I am working or resting;
 you know all my actions.
 Even before I speak,
 you already know what I will say.
 You are around me on every side;
 you protect me with your power.
 Your knowledge of me is too deep;
 it is beyond my understanding
 (Psalm 139:1–6)*

The first building block of the discernment process is the belief in the goodness of God. The God who examines us and knows us deeply, more than we know ourselves, is a loving and gracious God who wants the best for us. To really open ourselves to knowing and doing the will of God requires trust that God’s intentions toward us are deeply good. It is a belief held deep in the core of our being that God’s will is the best thing that could happen to us under any circumstances.

Believe that Love is Our Primary Calling

“Which commandment is the most important of all?”

Jesus replied, “The most important one is this: ‘Listen, Israel! The Lord our God is the only Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second most important commandment is this: ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself.’ There is no other commandment more important than these two.” (Mark 12:28–31)

The second building block of the discernment process is the belief that love is our primary calling. Jesus summarizes the entire law—all the requirements of doing what God requires of us— in the triple commandment of loving God with everything we have, and loving our neighbor and ourselves. Love is what’s most important in life. It is the foundation of life in Christ. Everything depends on our love of God, neighbor, and self.

The choices we make are always about love and which choice enables us to keep following God into love. There may be other factors to consider, but the deepest question for us as Christian people is, what does love call for in this situation? What would love do? Discernment is intended to take us deeper and deeper into the heart of God’s will, that we would follow God passionately into love.

Believe that God Communicates with Us

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, who will stay with you forever. He is the Spirit, who reveals the truth about God. The world cannot receive him, because it cannot see him or know him. But you know him, because he remains with you and is in you.

The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and make you remember all that I have told you. (John 14:16–17, 26)

The third building block is the belief that God does communicate with us through the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is given to help us know the demands of love in our situation. The practices of discernment assume a deep- seated belief in God’s presence and action through the Holy Spirit in the midst of our daily experience. It assumes that God’s will continues to be revealed as it is needed and as we are able to hear it and respond to it.

Through the Holy Spirit, the risen Christ is present with us today. We can rely, then, on the Holy Spirit to bring to mind and to heart that which we need to live out our Christian life today.

Believe in Life

Today I am giving you a choice between good and evil, between life and death. If you obey the commands of the Lord your God, which I give you today, if you love him, obey him, and keep all his laws, then you will prosper and become a nation of many people.

I am now giving you the choice between life and death, between God’s blessing and God’s curse, and I call heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Choose life. (Deuteronomy 30:15–16, 19)

The fourth building block is the belief that we are called to choose life in all of our decisions. Discernment grounds our capacity to live a fully and truly human life. In discernment, we are constantly choosing life over death that we may live in the love of God. In discernment, then, we move beyond avoiding evil. Among good options, we seek those that better align us with God’s creative purpose. *Discernment always aims at enhancing one’s participation in the work of God; it is always undertaken for the glory of God and the healing of the world. Therefore, several dispositions are vital for the practice to be followed with integrity:*

- ◆ *A passionate commitment to follow God. The guidance we seek is toward the decision that will bring us into the fullest possible participation in the work of God in the world.*
- ◆ *An attitude of indifference toward all other drives and desires. If we are to align ourselves with God’s purposes, we must first detach ourselves from our own desires for wealth, prestige, and security.*
- ◆ *A deep sensitivity to the ways and being*
- ◆ *of God. This sensitivity is cultivated through prayer, reading and meditating on Scripture, worship, and faithful acts of mercy and justice.*

(Frank Rogers, “Discernment,” in *Practicing Our Faith*)

Activity 5. Ways to Live the Christian Practice of Discernment

1. Examples of Practicing Discernment

Introduce the participants to the process of discernment in the Activity by creating several demonstrations of the process in action. Use the essay in the Activity and the worksheet to structure your responses.

Here are several ways to conduct a demonstration of the discernment process. Feel free to combine these ideas in your demonstration. It is important to have examples that are suitable for your participants, e.g. a family example, a teenage example, a young adult example, an adult example, etc. You can use the children's process on the handout *Try It—Making Good Decisions* if you are developing a children's example.

1. You can create real-world examples of the process in action by using case studies, such as the five stories in Activity 1 and then use the discernment process to develop a response to the questions/actions. This will illustrate how an individual or household can utilize the process.
2. You can invite several people from the church to share personal examples of how they have practiced discernment using the discernment process as a framework for their presentation. Be sure to have a variety of situations to connect with the participants.
3. You can use a segment from a film in which an individual or family is faced with a decision. Use the film to "set-up" the situation and then use the discernment process to develop a response to the questions/actions, illustrating how someone might use the process in this situation.

2. Applying the Discernment Process

To help the participants envision ways to use the discernment process in their lives ask them to review the two decisions they identified in Activity 2. *Decisions You Have Made*—the wise decision and the one they regret.

Have them analyze the two decisions using the 10 "steps" in the discernment process. Explain that they should work through each step in the process. Have them note things they did and did not do, and what they would do differently now that they have the process. If a family is analyzing a "children's decision" that can use the children's handout *Try It—Making Good Decisions*.

In groups ask the participants to reflect on the following question and share insights they gained from applying the discernment process: *How can using the process of discernment be beneficial to me and my family and improve our decision-making?*

Conclude by presenting "The Benefits of Discernment" at the end of the Activity essay.

Activity

Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God—what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect. (Romans 12:2)

Discernment means making a discriminating choice between two or more good options, seeking the best for this moment. These choices, while personal and conditional, are set within the community of faith and honor our previous well-made decisions. Discernment does not bring us absolute certainty, but rather operates in a climate of faith. Seeking to follow God's call moves us toward that which is better for us individually and for our world, and assures us that God will accompany us into the unknown. (Elizabeth Liebert, *The Art of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision-Making*)

Practicing Discernment

We know that the decision is in one sense "already made," since the answer is deep inside us. Our body, mind, and soul know what's best for us at this time. We only need to bring it to consciousness, sort through the options and find the energy (grace) of the moment. (Mary Margaret Funk, *Tools Matter for Practicing the Spiritual Life*)

How can we practice discernment in our lives as we seek to make good choices and follow God's will for us? How can we bring forth the decision that lies deep within us? Here are several steps that can guide you in the practice of discernment, whether as an individual or as a household. Be patient with the process. Remember, the more you practice discernment the more natural it will become.

1. Name the issue.

Begin by discovering and naming the issue or choice you face. What is really at stake is not always self-evident. Carefully framing the issue not only helps clarify the matter for discernment, but also begins the process of sifting and discriminating that is at the heart of discernment.

2. Pray for enlightenment.

We spend time in prayer and turn completely to God as we ask for guidance to go God's way. We should pray for guidance about the right action and for the ability to carry out the decision. Here's where a pattern of prayer is the key ingredient. If we only pray when we have a major choice or a divide in the road, we will have a hard time praying at the moment of discernment. There are hints and road signs along life's path, but what makes our life a way of God is having a practice of prayer.

*Protect me, O God; I trust in you for safety.
I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord;
all the good things I have come from you."*

*You, Lord, are all I have,
and you give me all I need;
my future is in your hands.*

*How wonderful are your gifts to me;
how good they are!*

*I will praise the Lord, because he guides me,
and in the night my conscience warns me.
I am always aware of the Lord's presence;
he is near, and nothing can shake me.*

*And so I am thankful and glad,
and I feel completely secure,
because you protect me from the power of death.*

*I have served you faithfully,
and you will not abandon me to the world of the dead.
You will show me the path that leads to life;
your presence fills me with joy
and brings me pleasure forever.*
(Psalm 16:1–2, 5–11)

Discernment Prayer

Walk with me, good and loving God, as I journey through life. May I take your hand and be led by your Holy Spirit. Fill me, inspire me, free me to respond generously to your call. For I believe you desire my deepest joy, and it is only in your company that my soul will be satisfied and my life will find its meaning and purpose. Amen. (Sisters of Notre Dame)

3. Gather appropriate data.

Discernment is not magic. We have to do our homework. The efficacy of the subsequent decision can rise or fall on obtaining accurate and relevant information about various options and their implications.

“Discernment asks us to pay attention. We need to attend to both what goes on around us and within us. Ideally, this attentiveness goes on much of the time, a sort of low level, constant spiritual sifting of the data of our experience. But there are times when discernment becomes much more focused, when a crossroad is reached or a choice called for. At times like these the cumulative wisdom of tradition tell us to pay attention on many levels: to consult Scripture, to seek the advice of trusted advisors, to heed the collective sense of the faithful, to read widely and deeply the best ancient and contemporary thinking, to pray, to attend to the prick of conscience and to the yearnings and dreamings of our hearts, to watch, to wait, to listen.” (Wendy Wright)

4. Sort our thoughts and data.

We watch our thoughts as they rise and fall, sorting them into three buckets: thoughts toward self, toward God, and toward evil. We notice which thoughts weigh most heavily on our minds, and eventually we see a pattern arise:

- ◆ thoughts toward our self
- ◆ thoughts toward God.

◆ thoughts toward evil

5. Virtually live the decision.

We make a decision to “live virtually.” We gather data, but in our thoughts we act “as if” we have made the decision. We take that tentative “choice” through the sorting process once again: is it toward self, toward God, or toward evil? We notice what the choice says. We try to verify whether, indeed, this choice that seems to be emerging is God’s way for us. If the hypothetical choice still seems viable, we take the decision as a tentative given and “test” it. We put it on and act “as if” it is a decision that is final and to be implemented. Do we feel good about it? Usually if it is God’s way, we feel a profound joy. Even if the decision has difficult consequences, the grace seems to be there to live with it.

Then we keep it in our consciousness “as if” the decision has been made for at least two weeks or more—long enough to watch how we handle the climate of this decision.

While virtually living the decision, it is best not to tell others that the decision has been made because they begin to act as if the decision is “a fact,” and we will end up managing their grief or delight instead of listening to our own interior responses to the decision. We continue to live the two weeks (or another prudent space of time) “as if” we were implementing the tentative decision.

6. Look for a confirming sign.

In this step, we bring the decision back to prayer, asking God to confirm it. We look for the presence of indicators, the touchstones or norms that the tradition suggests are signs of the work of the Holy Spirit. We look for a sign from God that is convincing and supportive of the decision. We check our feelings and see if they are joyful and peace-filled. Even if part of the decision would be hard, there’s an abiding grace that enables one to do tough things.

Think of the story of the two disciples who meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection and their “confirming sign” that it was, in fact, Jesus, the Lord.

“Stay with us, the day is almost over and it is getting dark.” So he went in to stay with them. He sat down to eat with them, took the bread, and said the blessing; then he broke the bread and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he disappeared from their sight. They said to each other, “Wasn’t it like a fire burning in us when he talked to us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:29–32)

The disciples knew the deep truth of Jesus’ presence with them when their hearts began to burn. It’s a wonderful description of what we all might feel when we have followed God’s will for us and made a decision that is God-led.

This is an important time to consult others, checking with people who know us well and gathering more data. You may turn to one or two trusted individuals—a family member, friend, co-worker, or religious leader—to walk the discernment path with you. Remember that God speaks to us through our relationships as well as through our interior life. People who love us know us in ways we can’t know ourselves. They can see things we may be blind to.

If the sorting of thoughts points to either selfishness or evil; if we can't live in the two weeks of virtually implementing the decision; if there is no confirming sign; if there is no joy, peace, or consolation; if there's a vague discomfort and an abiding restlessness; if there's anxiety that's deep and abiding, then it may be best to go back to step one. Take up another "as if" decision and see if you have more confidence in the alternative option.

But if the "as if" brings joy, and there's grace to do it, and the confirming sign brings peace, then the decision is probably right.

7. Make the decision.

We make the decision, putting it in concrete terms: I've decided to take a job, or move to a new city, or.... The decision is most helpful when it is clear, action-oriented, and you are the subject, the doer. A decision requires the will to act and represents a deliberate choice. It is one of the most awesome things a human being can do: make choices and follow through as a co-creator with God. Notice the decision isn't a goal or an aspiration, but a deed to be done and done by you.

8. Implement the decision.

Seek God's wisdom in working out the practicalities around your decision. Examine the decision you have just made. Ask:

- ◆ Can my decision be broken down into steps? If so, note an appropriate order.
- ◆ Does anyone need to be informed about this decision in advance of its implementation? If so, what is the best way to do that?
- ◆ Who besides me might be involved in carrying out the decision? How will I invite them to this role?
- ◆ If some of them choose not to join me, what will I do?
- ◆ Who will support me along the way?

If reflecting and praying on these practicalities elicits some fear or resistance, weigh this against the experience of spiritual freedom that resulted from your decision. Ask for the grace to act from that place of spiritual freedom.

9. Ritualize the decision.

Perhaps you can light a candle, or write a letter confirming it, or call a friend, or have a special meal. Mark the day on your calendar. Take the first step to implement your decision.

10. Guard your heart and watch your thoughts.

There's more to implementation than simply doing the work. It includes the interior work of guarding our hearts and watching our thoughts. This takes a lifetime. While implementing the decision, from time to time there will arise the thought, "I wish I had not done what I did." Give these thoughts to God in prayer. We consider our decision final and all "what ifs" as simply temptations that divide our hearts and fragment our minds. We turn to God in prayer.

We may say, “But what if I made the wrong decision?” You made it in good faith and in prayer. If you should go now in another direction, God will make that evident in a significant way, so for the daily work of implementing this decision you need only attend to carrying out your resolve. We should be at peace because we made the decision in good faith and God will give us a sign if we need to change your decision. Our goal is lining up our external life so that it expresses our intentions to seek God in everyone and everything, all the days of our life.

(The process of discernment is developed from *Tools Matter for Practicing the Spiritual Life* by Mary Margaret Funk and *The Art of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision-Making* by Elizabeth Liebert)

The Benefits of Discernment

Practicing discernment brings many benefits to us as individuals and to our family or household. By practicing discernment we take time to listen in prayer for the voice of the Holy Spirit. We generously listen to the advice of those who love us. We depend on God rather than deciding on our own. We recognize our motivations and the source of our deep gladness. We are able to read both our mind and heart when making decisions. And we are attached to God’s love and will alone.

Discernment is a process. We gradually “put on the mind of Christ” (Phil. 2:4; 1 Cor. 2:14) every time we search out and chose that which better aligns with the Jesus of the Gospels, the Christ of faith. A discerning life, then, is composed of repeated discerning moments; likewise, each major discernment rests on many small moments of listening for God in the midst of everyday life. Our intention is that all our decisions will enhance this putting on the mind of Christ. To the degree that they do, we are fulfilling the purpose for which we have been created. In this fulfillment, we simultaneously experience our deepest spiritual freedom.

(Elizabeth Liebert, *The Art of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision-Making*)

Discernment Guide

1. Name the issue.
2. Pray for enlightenment.
3. Gather appropriate data.
 - ◆ Consult Scripture.
 - ◆ Seek the advice of trusted advisors.
 - ◆ Heed the collective sense and wisdom of the Christian community.
 - ◆ Read widely and deeply the best ancient and contemporary thinking.
 - ◆ Pray.
4. Sort our thoughts and data.
 - ◆ Thoughts toward our self
 - ◆ Thoughts toward God
 - ◆ Thoughts toward evil
 - ◆ Is the choice that seems to be emerging God's way for us?
5. Virtually live the decision.
6. Look for a confirming sign.
 - ◆ Can we live in the two weeks of virtually implementing the decision?
 - ◆ Is there a confirming sign?
 - ◆ Is there joy, peace, or consolation or is there discomfort, restlessness, or anxiety?
7. Make the decision.
8. Implement the decision.
 - ◆ Can my decision be broken down into steps? If so, note an appropriate order.
 - ◆ Does anyone need to be informed about this decision in advance of its implementation? If so, what is the best way to do that?
 - ◆ Who besides me might be involved in carrying out the decision? How will I invite them to this role?
 - ◆ If some of them choose not to join me, what will I do?
 - ◆ Who will support me along the way?
 - ◆ If reflecting and praying on these practicalities elicits some fear or resistance, weigh this against the experience of spiritual freedom that resulted from your decision. Ask for the grace to act from that place of spiritual freedom.
9. Ritualize the decision.
10. Guard your heart and watch your thoughts.

Activity 6. Practicing Discernment Daily: Paying Attention to God

Conclude the session by introducing people to the Prayer of Examen and then leading them through the process as a group.

The Prayer of Examen helps us look for traces of God's actions in our daily life, individually or as a household. It is usually done in the evening, looking back over the day, or it can be done as a household at the evening meal. This is a time of quiet to spend alone or with each other in the presence of God.

1. First, note the gifts God has given you today. Give thanks for all God's gifts and benefits.

Pause for reflection.

2. Ask God that this reflection be a time of special grace and revelation. You can use these words:
Be near us now Lord. Let us look together at the day.

Pause for reflection.

3. Review the day with God. Look at the stirrings of your heart, your thoughts, your choices as the day progressed. Which have been of God? Which not? What does God want to say to you about both?

Pause for reflection.

4. Give God thanks and ask for forgiveness for any failure or omission, and for healing from their effects. Use these or similar words:

Gracious God, everything is a gift from you. I give you thanks and praise for the gifts of today, such as

I ask your forgiveness and mercy for

I ask your healing in

Pause for reflection.

5. Look forward to the next day, and plan concretely with God how to live it according to God's desire for your life. Ask for the graces you desire for tomorrow.

Lord God, continue to be present with me in my life each day.

Pause for reflection.

Activity

The Prayer of Examen helps us look for traces of God's actions in our daily life, individually or as a household. It is usually done in the evening, looking back over the day, or it can be done as a household at the evening meal. You may also use it to pray about any other significant period of time (such as a week or a year).

Allow between five and fifteen minutes for this spiritual exercise. Eliminate distractions during this time: no TV or radio, no iPods, no phones. This is a time of quiet to spend alone or with each other in the presence of God.

- ◆ Note the gifts God has given you today. Give thanks for all God's gifts and benefits.
- ◆ Ask God that this reflection be a time of special grace and revelation. You can use these words:

Be near us now Lord. Let us look together at the day.

- ◆ Review the day with God. Look at the stirrings of your heart, your thoughts, your choices as the day progressed. Which have been of God? Which not? What does God want to say to you about both?
- ◆ Give God thanks and ask for forgiveness for any failure or omission, and for healing from their effects. Use these or similar words:

Gracious God, everything is a gift from you. I give you thanks and praise for the gifts of today, such as

I ask your forgiveness and mercy for

I ask your healing in

- ◆ Look forward to the next day, and plan concretely with God how to live it according to God's desire for your life. Ask for the graces you desire for tomorrow.

Lord God, continue to be present with me in my life each day.

(From *The Art of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision-Making* by Elizabeth Liebert)

*We want to know that we are making our choices in God, that we are living our life according to the purposes for which God brought us to this particular time and place. We long to see our lives as part of a larger whole, contributing to some greater purpose. We long to experience the presence of God and respond faithfully to that presence. (Ruth Haley Barton in *Sacred Rhythms*)*

The Prayer of Examen for Children

1. Quiet the children before bedtime.
2. Ask them what made them happy over the past day.
3. Ask them what made them sad over the past day.
4. Ask them what they look forward to tomorrow.
5. Remind them to thank God for what made them happy, ask for God's help when they are sad, and pray for God's presence in the coming day.

Activity 7. Prayers for Discernment

God our Creator,
You have a plan for each one of us,
You hold out to us a future full of hope.
Give us the wisdom of your Spirit
so that we can see the shape of your plan
in the gifts you have given us,
and in the circumstances of our daily lives. Give us the freedom of your Spirit,
to seek you with all our hearts,
and to choose your will above all else.
We make this prayer through Christ our Lord.

* * * *

Prayer of Thomas Merton

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
Nor do I really know myself.
And the fact that I think I am following your will Does not mean I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
Does in fact please you.
And I hope I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this,
You will lead me by the right road
Though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore I will trust you always.
Though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death I will not fear, for you are ever with me.
And you will never leave me to face my struggles alone. (Based on Jeremiah 29:11–13)

* * * *

Prayer of Saint Patrick

(Text attributed to Saint Patrick, trans. Cecil F. Alexander)

I bind unto myself today
the power of God to hold and lead,
an eye to watch, the might to stay,
an ear to harken to my need.
the wisdom of my God to teach,
a hand to guide, a shield to ward;
the word of God to give me speech,
the heavenly host to be my guard.
Christ be with me,
Christ within me,
Christ behind me,
Christ before me,

Christ beside me,
Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me;
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ in quiet,
Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.