



Diocese of Canterbury
CHANGED LIVES → CHANGING LIVES

Listening

& discerning

on the way



September-November 2020



Listening & Discerning on the Way Together

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Listening & Discerning on the Way Together

A word from Bishop Rose

Dear sisters and brothers,

Consider this your invitation to a deeper spiritual conversation this Autumn. The Coronavirus has had a terrible effect on our communities, on our nation, our world and on those most vulnerable in our society. It has also brought into sharper focus God's call on his Church to be a beacon of hope in dark times. This period has presented us with the opportunity - the necessity, in fact - to stop 'life as normal' and spend time intentionally seeking God as a diocesan family, asking for his guidance for the next stage of our life together. It has been a 'kairos moment'* of learning for us in which we are seeing even more clearly than before, that the foundation of our life and ministry is God's loving and saving movement in the world.



We must not lose this moment. So I am inviting you - the individuals, young people, families and church communities of our diocese - to join me this Autumn in engaging people in a prayerful conversation around three questions:

- **What are we noticing...**
of God's movement at this difficult time?
- **What are we learning...**
as we reflect on how God seems to be moving?
- **What might we let go of or allow to die...**
so that we may enter a new future with God?

I am hugely grateful to our wonderful Mission & Ministry, Communities & Partnerships and Children & Young people's Teams who have worked hard to produce [a range of resources](#) to help us all to consider these questions, listening to God and to one another. Please join the conversation, make use of the resources, be creative in how you engage with these questions. Most of all, please tell us what you are hearing, tell us what you are learning, so that together we can shape our future life as a diocesan family together. Thank you - be assured of my prayers for you all as we seek God afresh this Autumn,

Rt Revd Rose Hudson-Wilkin

Bishop of Dover

*Kairos in the New Testament means 'the appointed time in the purpose of God' (New Dictionary of Christian Theology)





Facilitating the discernment process locally

Briefing for Facilitators

Overview

This is designed to be a process with three key questions aimed at helping us to notice the movement of God at a time of great potential for holy discernment and deep learning (and no little change) for us as a diocesan family:

- **What are we noticing...**
of God's movement at this difficult time?
- **What are we learning...**
as we reflect on how God seems to be moving?
- **What might we let go of or allow to die...**
so that we may enter a new future with God?

Noticing what God is doing

In the spirit of the [Novena](#), and other godly conversations, this is a simple process enabling local churches, and together our whole diocese, to discern God's movement at this time, using the three key questions above.

What we are asking you to do

Firstly, we would like you to open conversations using the three questions above, as widely as you can in your local context. This means involving as many people possible. The process is described fully below (see 'The method') followed by a timetable. Please stick to the timetable so that you can ensure that the feedback from your church/churches are heard and get to shape our life going forward. We especially want to hear from children (see [Briefing for Children and Families](#)). You'll see that we would like you to do all this a couple of times, in two 'loops'.

We would like your summaries of what you have heard after the first 'loop', at which point the Bishop and her team will offer us all a reflection on what is being heard.

We would then like you to repeat the process, checking out what you are noticing locally, in





order to deepen your own local discernment, and to enrich our collective discernment. We expect this second 'loop' to yield some deeper, richer insights. The Bishop will then share her impressions of what we are all noticing, learning and hearing at this time.

The following may help you personally, and may be of use in 'pitching' this process with others.

What this process is

- corporate discernment of the movement of God – a spiritual process
- a 'whole diocese' conversation in which we all listen deeply, continuing and deepening work already begun
- a process where hearing what God may be saying in your local context is vital
- a process in which simply articulating and holding the questions is valuable and permitted
- giving attention to what God is, or may be, doing
- a process which will yield significant threads belonging to God's future for us, as we identify what are we hearing and noticing
- hope at a time of seismic change

If you are interested in more, see the documents:

- [A theological note](#)
- [A 'kairos moment' for the Church](#)
- [Discernment in the New Testament](#)

What this process is not

- based on an assumption that discernment is a new thing for us all. Or that we are so good at spotting what God is up to that we need do no more
- a 'consultation' so that we can make 'decisions' about the future – listening to God is even more fundamental than 'a means to an end'
- a substitute for significant conversations looking at 'issues' – money, buildings, ministry...
- a way of collecting various 'good ideas' or a way of identifying 'good news stories' for publicity purposes – though spotting God's movement is always good news!
- a way of managing our reality, or a way of minimising anxiety, or a communications exercise





What is required of us as leaders and facilitators

- To create and hold the spaces for conversation and discernment
- To enable this discernment conversation locally because this is of real value (it therefore would be good to avoid language such as, 'the diocese has asked us to', etc.)
- To use the methods available to us presently – many (though not all) churches are more connected than previously through the newer means and traditional ones – emails, printed material, phone calls, etc.
- To use the three questions
- Please go as deep and wide in your context as you can. Feel free to be imaginative, creative, or different in how you do this. We will ask for specific summaries of what you have heard children say
- Not to feel any of us must 'answer the questions', 'fix the problems', 'resolve the pain'
- To make a summary of what is being heard and said locally so that we can all reflect on broad themes which emerge
- To wrap these discernment conversations around with prayer, making space for all of us to sense the voice and movement of the Holy Spirit both before and after discussing the three questions

There is a separate briefing on helpful [Listening and Discerning Prayer Practices](#) for this, and some input here below.

The method

1. Prayer: wondering and waiting

Spend some time in prayer before introducing the three questions. See the [Listening and Discerning Prayer Practices document](#) for 'Waiting and Wondering' prayer ideas which will help people to attune to the Holy Spirit and approach the questions with openness and curiosity.

2. Asking the questions

Ask these questions in the following form, and record responses. There is a separate [Listening and Discerning Summary Form](#) to make this easy.

Ask groups, ask individuals, ask families to look at these questions together and to pass you their responses. This can be done:

- together in real time - e.g. online in groups or as part of worship
- face to face where safe in congregations or groups - e.g. during the Eucharist
- alone, using email or other means
- conversationally without formality





...be creative! There is a separate [briefing for children and families](#) that you may find helpful.

- **What are we noticing?**
- **What are we learning?**

These are discernment questions and could be unpacked – for example, ‘What are we noticing...about God’s movement at this difficult/disrupted/pandemic time?’ ‘What are we learning...as God’s people at the moment?’ ‘What are we noticing around us in our wider community (or networks)?’

People may find it helpful to personalise the questions to start with: ‘What am I noticing?’ ‘What am I learning?’ But if you use that approach as a starting-place, it would be useful to bring the conversation back to ‘we’, so as to draw out people’s thoughts about our corporate journey as well as their personal journey.

- **What might we let go of or allow to die, so that we may enter a new future with God?**

This question may be used after attention has been given to the first two – or maybe as third question on the second loop. Discern yourself when to use this question (but resist the temptation to avoid this most deeply Christian of inquiries).

3. Prayer: receiving and responding

Spend some time in prayer after holding the three questions conversation. See the [Listening and Discerning Prayer Practices](#) document for ‘Receiving and Responding’ prayer ideas which will help make space for people to absorb the words and ideas which God has drawn their attention to throughout the conversation, and to notice where the Spirit is prompting them to respond in prayer and action. There are ideas for individuals and for groups, and you can use one or more of them, to suit your situation.

4. Your summaries

Then please send us your summary using the Listening and Discerning on the Way Summary Form. You can email this to listening@diocant.org. Or you can complete and submit the same form on our diocesan website at www.canterburydiocese.org/listening. You can use the same form for both loops. Sticking to the deadlines ([see timetable](#)) will ensure your voices are heard.

Thank you!

Thank you for your leadership in helping the local church and our whole diocese along our listening and discernment journey. We are deeply grateful for this. Please join us in praying that the people of God would hear Lord of the Church through this process.





Listening & Discerning on the Way

Briefing for children & families

This briefing document has been written for children and families to enable them to join in with the listening and discerning exercise happening within our Church communities.

Providing opportunities for children and young people to grow in their faith is God's desire. Jesus welcomed children to him and instructed those around him to have childlike faith (Matthew 18:2-3). Just as Jesus wanted to hear and learn from the children, so do we. We want to seize this moment to listen as a diocesan family and use it as a springboard to support the growing and nurturing of our children and families' lifelong and personal relationship with God.

We want to hear what God is saying to our children and young people - their voice is vital in capturing all that God is saying to his people.

[This timetable](#) shows the dates for the listening loops. We recognise that the three listening questions that are being posed to the wider church community, may not be fully accessible, yet, to our children and young people. Therefore we ask that they engage with the listening questions for family using some of the exercises below in order to gather what God is saying to each of you.

There is [a special feedback form](#) so that you can share your responses to this process and ensure that your voices are heard and help to shape our future as a diocesan family.

Our prayer is that through the development of spiritual practices as a family, children will be empowered to discern God's voice, actions and desires for their lives and those around them.

The listening questions that are being used in our church communities during this time are as follows:

- **What are we noticing...**
of God's movement at this difficult time?
- **What are we learning...**
as we reflect on how God seems to be moving?
- **What might we let go of or allow to die...**
so that we may enter a new future with God?





The listening questions that we'd recommend for use with children and families are as follows:

- **Ask God what he wants to show us**
I wonder where you have noticed God?
- **Ask God what he wants us to learn**
I wonder where God is working and how he would like us to join in?
- **Ask God what he wants us to stop, so he can work with us to start something new**

Sharing children & young people's faith journeys

God speaks to children. He is faithful enough to keep talking even when they don't think they hear him.

How can we point out where God is already working in their daily lives, as they learn to listen and recognise his voice?

The exercises outlined below are designed to support you and your family in forming a daily spiritual rhythm to 'chat and catch' with God. So, when you are asked 'What are you hearing from God?' 'What have you noticed God doing or saying?' your family will be able to truly engage with these questions, because it is part of your daily walk and spiritual practice.

I wonder how you will be able to make some of these practices a habit and part of your daily life? I wonder what the impact will be on you and your family?

Catch & Chat

We offer our grateful thanks to the work of Rachel Turner from Parenting For Faith who has influenced this section.

'Chat and Catch' is simply a way to describe prayer. Just like we chat with our friends, and catch their answer - whether they tell us in words, a gesture or just body language - so we can chat and catch with God.

Chatting (conversational prayer) encourages children to use informal language, as well as non-verbal forms, to communicate with God. **Catching** (listening to God through prayer) is simply supporting children to recognise and respond to God's voice – however he chooses to speak – meaning that they can easily, naturally and directly connect with God in a two-way, ongoing conversation about anything, whenever and wherever they are.





Using the term 'catch', when thinking about listening to God, helps children understand that listening is active and they need to be ready to 'catch' whatever God is going to send them.

The promises in the Bible tell us that God will answer when we speak to him and that we will recognise his voice. We all have to learn how to do this and make it part of our daily practice so that we become more in tune with God's voice.

Example chatting prompts:

- Tell God about your day, what went well, what didn't
- Tell God something that makes you feel worried and why
- Show or tell God something you are proud of
- Tell or show God something you are thankful for
- Tell God about a time when you felt really alone
- Tell God about something that makes you feel loved

Example catching prompts:

- Jesus is there anything today that we could thank you for? Why?
- Is there anything that we need to say sorry for?
- Is there anyone you want us to pray for?
- Are there any burdens or sadness we are carrying that you want to lift for us? Ask Jesus where it came from, what it is, and if he would please remove it.
- Jesus, do you have any promises or blessings for me before I go to sleep?

Recording what we catch – practical examples

- Consider starting a family journal to record God's words and promises
- Use post it notes or luggage tags to record God's answers to your catch questions
- Share what you have heard with each other or other friends and family
- Could you draw or paint what God has shown you/ spoken to you about?
- Could you use Lego, playdough or sand to recreate what God said to you?

Find out more about Catch & Chat - including ideas for engaging with this as a family - [on our website here](#).





Examen Prayer

The Examen prayer is a practice for discerning the voice and activity of God within the flow of the day. It is a chance to reflect on the day and consider how and where God might be prompting you to behave or act. You may choose to discuss some of these together, ponder silently on some of the prompts, or turn them into prayers. Adapt the questions to suit your family. Model and coach your children in this practice, so it becomes part of their daily rhythm.

1. **Give thanks** – What are you grateful for today? Where have you noticed God at work? Were there moments when I felt ungrateful?
2. **Ask for help** – What do you need help with? Who around you might need help? Where have you seen God at work?
3. **Reflect on your day** - What have you seen, what have you noticed? What was the most life-giving part of your day? What was the most difficult or challenging part of your day? When today did you feel connected to God? When did you feel least connected?
4. **Say sorry** - Look inward, who/what do I need to say sorry to/for, What might I need to do differently?
5. **Decide** - Look forward into the coming days... Where/What might God be prompting you to go, do or say?

I wonder how you might use this prayer and reflection exercise with your family?

I wonder how it might open up listening and noticing conversations with your family?

Stepping into Bible stories

This exercise encourages your family to ‘step into’ a Bible story to hear what God is saying to them through the words. Teach your child to visualise the story in their imagination as they meet with and catch from God. Ask your child to choose a Bible story. Invite the child to find Jesus in the story, approach him, talk to him, touch him and listen to him. As you read the story together discuss: “Where is he, what is he doing, what is he saying?” “I wonder what Jesus wants to say to you through this story?” Try the example below:

Jesus calms a storm

Text from Mark 4:35-41 (The Passion Translation)

Later that day, after it grew dark, Jesus said to his disciples, “Let’s cross over to the other side of the lake.” After they had sent the crowd away, they pushed off from shore with him, as he





had been teaching from the boat, and there were other boats that sailed with them.

- Can you see the boat? What does it look like? What does the sea look like? Can you see Jesus?

Suddenly, as they were crossing the lake, a ferocious storm arose, with violent winds and waves that were crashing into the boat until it was all but swamped.

- Tell me about the storm. What are the disciples doing? How are they feeling? What would you do if you were there?

But Jesus was calmly sleeping in the stern, resting on a cushion. So they shook him awake, saying, “Teacher, don’t you even care that we are all about to die!” Fully awake, he rebuked the storm and shouted to the sea, “Hush! Calm down! Peace, be still!” All at once the wind stopped howling and the water became perfectly calm.

- What was Jesus like? What was it like to see the storm calmed? How did the disciples react? How did you react?

Then he turned to his disciples and said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Haven’t you learned to trust yet? But they were overwhelmed with fear and awe and said to one another, “Who is this man who has such authority that even the wind and waves obey him?”

- I wonder what Jesus wants to say to you through this story?

Reflect on these thoughts together. Encourage your child to chat more with God about what he said to them through the story. Encourage them to catch from God by asking him a question.

I wonder how asking what God is saying to them through the story will enable your child to ‘catch’ from God?

Rebecca Swansbury
Schools Officer





Listening & Discerning on the Way

Prayer Practices

Listening and discerning are richer when rooted in prayer. For that reason, we would like to ‘wrap’ some prayer practices around our discernment conversations, stopping to pray before asking the three questions, then taking time in prayer afterwards to honour and respond to what we’ve heard from God and from each other. This document offers some suggestions for the kind of prayer practices which fit well with a discernment conversation like this – practices which:

- help us to still and centre ourselves so we can listen better
- cultivate curiosity and openness towards God, one another and the world
- help us distinguish the voice of God among our own thoughts and conversations
- stir a compassionate desire to pray in response to what we’ve heard
- help us know how to act in response to what we’ve heard, both individually and together

Prayer helps us open our minds and hearts to hear God and one another, and prayer helps us not to lose track of what we’ve heard. We hope that, wherever this discernment conversation happens, it will be wrapped in prayer: whether it’s a one-to-one conversation and we simply stop for a moment of prayerful stillness before we start and again before we move on to other things, or whether the conversation is happening in a group meeting or worship service and we build in time to pray together either side of answering the questions.

There are many kinds of prayer of course, but there are certain practices which are particularly helpful when it comes to listening and discerning, and those are the ones we’re suggesting for this discernment conversation. The prayer time before the conversation focuses on the practices of waiting and wondering, and the one after the conversation focuses on the practices of receiving and responding. Below is a ‘menu’ of suggested activities for each of these prayer times. They vary in style and length, so as to be useful in a variety of settings.

Whether you’re reflecting on your own, talking with friends, leading a small group or planning a service (in church or online), we hope you’ll find something to help you pray. Of course, these ideas are just a starting point, and we hope you will feel free to be creative, writing your own prayers and creating your own activities to help people engage in the vital practices of waiting, wondering, receiving and responding.

Please note that all prayer activities should be planned and carried out with due regard to the [current COVID-19 guidelines](#).





Prayer activities: Waiting & Wondering

(See Section 1 of the method outlined in the Facilitators' Briefing).

Simply put, the practice of waiting helps us still and centre ourselves, recognise the noise of our own thoughts and steady our hearts and minds in the flow of the Spirit. The practice of wondering helps us open up: move away from what preoccupies us; become aware of the world around us; listen to the voices of others; become aware of the work of God in and around us.

The activities below are all examples of ways we can engage in the practices of waiting and wondering. They are written with groups in mind, but all of them can also be done by people praying alone.

1. Stilling & Centring Prayer

(1-10 mins)

Create a space for stillness. Depending on your situation, it could be anything from 1 minute to 10 minutes, though 5 minutes works well for most people/groups. Invite people to quieten their minds (but not to try and stop thinking altogether), focusing their thoughts on the presence of God around them and within them; welcoming the Holy Spirit. You may find one or more of the following helpful:

- Play a piece of music to help people focus their minds. (If you're online, remember to mute all participants so that there's no interference in the sound.)
- Show an image for people to look at as they still their thoughts.
- Invite people to repeat a centring phrase in their minds, using it to draw their focus back to God each time their thoughts drift:
'God's love endures for ever'
'Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner'
'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want'
or simply 'Jesus'
- Invite people to imagine themselves walking to a peaceful place with Jesus and sitting down in his company.
- Invite people simply to become aware of the sights and sounds around them and the feelings in their bodies, as they open themselves to the Spirit of God.





2. Cultivating gratitude

(1-10 mins)

Set a 1-minute timer and invite people to write down things they're thankful to God for. Encourage them to write as many as they can think of in 1 minute. Then, if time allows, invite them to spend a couple of minutes in silence, looking over their list and allowing gratitude to well up for the ways in which they've seen the goodness of God in their lives. If you have more time, and if the group would be comfortable doing so, invite them to choose one or two things from their lists to share with each other as a testimony of thankfulness.

3. Art and Wonder

(5-10 mins)

Choose a picture which you find beautiful and/or inspiring and invite people to look at it for 2 or 3 minutes. Then invite them to think of one word or phrase which sums up the impact the picture has made on them as they've been looking at it. If you want to give a little more direction, you could ask them to think of one characteristic of God which comes to mind as they look at the picture.

Having given time for people to look at the picture, invite people to speak out their word or phrase. Leave enough space for each person to share in an unhurried way. If you ask people to speak only the word or phrase they've chosen, without elaborating on it, you will quickly find the sharing becomes prayerful and reflective for everyone present. This activity can also be done using a piece of music, a sculpture or even an everyday object instead of a picture.

4. Lectio Divina

(10-20 mins)

Lectio Divina is the practice of reading Scripture in such a way that we make space for the Holy Spirit to interrupt our reading with insight:

- Choose a passage of Scripture which is between 7 and 12 verses long (approximately).
- Invite everyone to spend a minute or so in silence, welcoming the Holy Spirit to speak through the Word of God.
- Read the passage through slowly, then give another few minutes silence for people to reflect on the reading and notice their initial reactions to it.
- Read the passage again, this time asking people to look out for a word or phrase which seems to 'stick out' as they listen.
- Invite them to catch hold of that phrase and not to worry about listening to the rest of the passage.





- Give another few minutes after the reading for people to reflect on the word/phrase which the Spirit has given them, inviting them to turn that word/phrase into a prayer in their minds.
- If you have time, and if the group would be comfortable doing so, invite people to share the word or phrase they were given, and perhaps take time to pray for each other.

5. Sung Worship

(5-20 mins)

Invite a musician/worship group to lead the group in singing several songs which focus people's thoughts on the character of God, preferably leaving some space in between the songs for stillness and reflection. This activity must comply with any COVID-19 guidelines on singing in worship. If you are praying alone, choose some recorded music which lifts your spirit and helps you become aware of the presence of God.

6. Prayer Walk

(10-20 mins)

There may be more informal contexts where a short prayer walk would be the ideal way to practice waiting and wondering, before starting to answer the 3 questions. Simply invite people to go for a short walk around the area where you're meeting. Encourage them to notice the beauty of creation and the signs of God's working in the world around them. Some may prefer to walk alone, while others will prefer to walk and talk in twos or threes.

You could even do the whole discernment conversation as a pilgrimage:

- Start with a stretch of walking, inviting people to wait on God and wonder at the beauty of creation.
- Then stop and sit together to talk over the 3 questions (maybe over a picnic).
- Finish by walking back to your starting point, using the return walk for the practices of receiving and responding (see below).

NB. The above would take at least 45 minutes to do well.

Prayer activities: Receiving & Responding

(See Section 3 of the method outlined in the Facilitators' Briefing).

The practice of receiving is where we sift through the conversation we've had, reflecting on what we've said and heard, in order that we might not miss what God is saying to us in that moment. The practice of responding is the sacred moment when we commit ourselves to earth that all-important word from God in our lives, either through prayer, through action or through





further waiting and wondering ... or perhaps all three.

The activities below are all examples of ways we can engage in the practices of receiving and responding. They are written as ideas for groups, but all of them can also be done by people praying alone.

1. Spotting the Treasure

(3-10mins)

Invite people to spend a minute or so in silence, gathering the treasure from the conversation – calling to mind the one or two words/phrases which have blessed/encouraged them. Then invite people to speak out their word or phrase. Leave enough space for each person to share in an unhurried way. If you ask people to speak only the word or phrase they've chosen, without elaborating on it, you will quickly find the sharing becomes prayerful and reflective for everyone present.

If time allows, follow this prayerful sharing with some time for the group to talk together about the words and phrases they chose. Do they notice any connections/similarities or any contrasts/dissonances? (This part of the exercise can be a little easier if you ask someone to write down the words/phrases as people speak them out, then display them so that the group can see them all together in one place.)

You could also run this exercise again, this time asking people to identify the words/phrases in the conversation which they found most uncomfortable or unsettling. There need to be appropriate levels of trust within the group for this second version of the exercise, since people will effectively be saying that words/phrases spoken by others in the group may have made them feel uncomfortable. People need to be able to hear one another without taking offence or passing judgement.

2. Examen Reflection

(5-10 mins)

Ask the following questions, giving at least 1 minute's silence after each one for people to reflect on their answer:

- What one thing most encouraged you about the conversation we've just had?
- What one thing most unsettled you about the conversation we've just had?





- What do you want to do differently as a result of the conversation we've just had?
- What do you want to ask God for in prayer as a result of the conversation we've just had?

If time allows, invite people to voice their prayers from the 4th question. If you have even more time, give people the opportunity to share any of their answers to the 4 questions. Keep it simple and prayerful – don't let it drift into a re-run of the discernment conversation itself.

3. Intercession

(5-10 mins)

Turning our listening into intercession – praying for others – is a vital way of earthing the word of God to us. Here are several ways you could do that:

- **Naming the connections**

Nominate someone to have a pen and paper to hand during the discernment conversation and to note down any groups or church activities named during the conversation. This might be sections of the congregation, groups who have used your building, groups the church has connections with in the local community ... anyone who gets a mention during the discernment conversation. During this time of prayer, invite that person to read out all the names of individuals/groups they've written down. Ask them to read slowly, leaving a few seconds' silence after each one, so that people can pray for those listed. Close this time by saying a prayer, perhaps using the Collect for the day or some other prayer which gathers together the prayers of the group.

- **Led intercessions**

Have a time of led intercession, prepared by yourself or another member of the group, bringing before God the needs of the church, the local community and the wider world.

- **Extemporaneous prayer**

Simply give space for people to voice prayers for the church, the community and the wider world which the conversation has prompted them to want to pray.

4. Prayers of Resolution

(3-7 mins)

Part of our responding is to invite a deeper work of the Spirit in us as individuals and as a church. Invite people to reflect on the conversation, then to form prayers starting with the phrase: "Lord, in the power of your Spirit, take us deeper into ..." (This prayer invites words like compassion, mission, courage, prayer, love, for example). Alternatively, invite people to pray their own prayers of response, but intersperse these with the following responsive prayer:





Lord, by the power of your Spirit,
Deepen your work in us.

5. Going Forward Together (3-7 mins)

Take time to pray with and for one another before you go your separate ways. Invite people to get into groups of 2 or 3 (this can be done in online settings if you have the option for breakout groups), to share one thing from the discernment conversation which has particularly stuck with them, or one thing they know God is calling them to do in response, and then to pray briefly for one another, whether out loud or silently. Invite people to remember who they've prayed for and to continue to remember them in prayer over the coming days. If you're praying alone, why not get in touch with a trusted friend and tell them what you've been encouraged/challenged by as you've prayed and reflected, and ask them to pray for you?

Lyndall Bywater

Changing Lives Prayer Network Coordinator





Listening & Discerning on the Way

A theological note

Why are we engaging together in this discernment process?

This discernment process is rooted in our understanding of the mission of God, known around the world today as the 'Missio Dei.' This is the idea that all mission is God's mission. Indeed God is a 'fountain of sending love' (David Bosch) pouring Godself out in redeeming love to the world in Christ and through the Spirit.

It follows that our task is to join in with what God is doing. It is not, as has famously been said, that 'the Church of God has a mission, rather that the God of mission has a Church.' The call is to engage with God's movement, not to baptise our own good ideas.

This powerful idea makes a great deal of sense in our culture today. Long gone are the days of Christendom when the culture itself (to use a metaphor of George Lings) rolled people into church. Now the culture tends to roll people away! Yet there are times when we can plainly see God at work – not just in the Church, but in the wider world.

In this context, our first task is to notice what God is up to – the task of discernment. Otherwise, if we don't practise this how can we join in? So, the process we are offering is, first and foremost, a spiritual one. How is God moving? How is the Spirit working at the moment? What might God be up to? Yes, among us, the Church – but also wider than that, around us in the world God loves so much?

So that's the theology behind this process. Theology is indeed always about who God is, and what God does. You may like to stop reading here, but if you want to think more about the nature of discernment, read on for some more theological markers.

God is Trinity

This means that God is God in relationship. The three Persons are one and undivided, yet wholly themselves in what has been described as a dance of mutual indwelling love. Yet this love is poured out towards the world. It follows that mission is always God's mission and therefore always about relationship. In our diocese's Missional Learning Communities we speak of spotting God's movement in people and through the relationships we intentionally form with them. We then put that into words, so that others may notice this too.





Discernment means noticing God's movement in the world

It can be helpful if we think of the Trinity as:

God the Father, our Creator: Where do we notice creativity or care within the Church but also beyond it? Are we noticing anything which reminds us of the Father's compassion, creativity and love?

God the Son, our Redeemer: Where do we notice people or movements which remind us of Jesus – his saving, healing, redeeming work? Where do we notice a love which is costly or sacrificial, a love with echoes of that love stronger than death?

God the Holy Spirit, our Life Giver: Where do we see evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in the world beyond the Church, the vitality of the Spirit, the connection and recognition that the Spirit enables?

Those who are interested will think more on these matters with the kind of 'holy pondering' which Luke attributes to Mary when she notices God's movement. JV Taylor's much referenced 'The Go-Between God' (SCM, 1972) traces the movement of the Spirit in human relationships through awareness, communication and vitality: "The Holy Spirit is the invisible third party who stands between me and the other, making us mutually aware."

Discernment means noticing God's movement - and putting it into words

More recently, Steven Guthrie, in 'Creator Spirit – the Holy Spirit and the art of becoming human' (Baker, 2011) has argued that discernment of the Spirit's movement is no less than 'the human vocation.' Such discernment is 'responsive', by which he refers to the kind of noticing we have been describing here. It is also 'creative', which means that we are to name and articulate what we notice of the Spirit's movement, and ultimately to act on that.

The act of putting into words what we are noticing of God's movement and telling another is crucial. A key Missional Learning Community and Changing Lives Conversations principle is that we do not learn through experience alone, rather we learn when we put our experience into words and tell someone else. Somehow the process of telling another leads to sharper discernment and to a sense of shared delight, even a sense of the presence of God with us.

This is the kind of focused, godly conversation which Bishop Rose is inviting our diocese towards. Such noticing and speaking is what we call discernment:





Thus says the Lord,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters...
Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
The wild animals will honour me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.
[Isaiah 43.16 and 18 – 21, NRSV](#)

Steve Coneys

Mission and Growth Advisor

P.S. If you are interested in the question, "Why engage in this process now?" see the article [‘A kairos moment for the Church’](#).





Listening & Discerning on the Way

A 'kairos' moment for the Church

The long decline of Christendom arguably began a century ago with the First World War and the last great pandemic in this country. The flu virus of 1918 – 19 led to 50 million deaths worldwide with 228,000 in the UK. A hundred years on we find ourselves at another moment of crisis, perhaps even more disorienting given the illusion of control we have built up since.

The Tragedies and Christian Congregations project group led by Professor Christopher Southgate has observed that an initial flurry of lockdown 'heroic action' by church leaders is inevitably being followed by a 'disillusionment' phase as the reality of the situation sets in. I have noticed that while some of my friends in ministry remain energised, others are owning a sense of being tired, stressed and feeling overwhelmed. So, 'earthing' the realities by naming what is happening, being present to the questions and pain ('living the questions,' in the researchers' words) are essential before we can start to make sense of it all.

I suggest that we are being given a kairos moment* in the middle of our more usual anxiety about the future of the Church, and our attempts to manage our decline. Kairos time contrasts with ordinary chronological time as a 'God moment' – an opportunity for God's extraordinary grace or work.

In John's Gospel kairos (time) and hora (hour) are used almost as synonyms. 'My time (kairos) is not yet here', says Jesus in John 7.6. Throughout the gospel, Jesus waits for his 'hour', the time when God's glory will be revealed. The kairos arrives in 13.1: 'Jesus knew that the hour (hora) had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father'. In the events that follow, God is at work to bring the creation back to life ('that you may have life', says John). The same pattern is seen in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark & Luke) where the intense activity of Jesus' ministry is followed by Jesus' passion, the time when he is 'done to', the kairos time where love's redeeming work is done.

We have not seen the kind of deep learning in the Church as a whole which can help us find God's 'preferred and promised future' in the deep waters of post-Christendom. For the end of Christendom requires change in the way we are, from a predominantly 'come to us' church culture to one in which God's people spot what God is up to in the world and form relationships around God's movement. We are not yet used to this. Try asking 'what God is doing' and we will usually come up with a list of things that we are doing – at national, diocesan and local levels.

*Kairos in the New Testament means 'the appointed time in the purpose of God' (New Dictionary of Christian Theology)





Such a profound shift is deeply adaptive: it will require extraordinary grace and learning. Have we been given such a kairos moment?

Such a process cannot be managed, directed or taught by those who already know the answers, as those people do not exist. We have never found our missional feet in post-Christendom before. This is about God's movement or flow, not our own best ideas, and therefore it must be discerned.

In normal life, with our busyness and our illusion of control, such discernment has so far been out of our collective reach. Indeed corporate discernment will not be easy now. Sense-making can only come from embracing the present reality, not short-circuiting it, and the temptation to live in denial, to get back to normal is always present.

The Partnership for Missional Church (PMC) process, overseen by Church Mission Society, now working in several English dioceses, and the parallel process in our own diocese (which we call Missional Learning Communities) suggest a way forward. PMC is all about corporate spiritual discernment so that the church can now find its way into God's preferred and promised future (a PMC phrase). We need to engage humbly in a process of spiritual discernment in order to learn together now.

What might such a process grounded in discernment look like in a local church, a deanery or a whole diocese?

In practice I am finding that two key questions which direct us to what God is doing, rather than what we are doing are "What are we noticing?" and "What are we learning?" Somehow, such an approach can engender a spirit of holy pondering (to use the word Luke attributes to Mary) rather than leading to a set of problems or solutions. In this way the conversation is framed around our corporate discernment of the movement of God.

Such discernment and reflection needs space. It might take an initial period of, say, four to six weeks to consider the two questions, whether at local or diocesan level, to gather responses and offer a further period of reflection. In a trusting environment a third question may be possible, "What are we noticing that we can let go or, or even allow to die, that we may enter God's future for us?"

This should be a genuinely 'whole system' approach, recognising that insights are at least as likely to come from surprising and unrecognised sources as any leaders. We are familiar with this as the Benedictine principle that 'it is often to a junior that the Lord reveals what is best'. In the NHS for example we can be confident that practical wisdom under pressure has been





gathered from all sources, including the cleaners and the porters. In our present context this means using all our means, from the telephone to our Zoom worship and virtual coffee meetings, to listen for the Spirit's movement among the whole people of God.

All the while the focus must be on corporate spiritual discernment. This is not a way of gathering information, or collecting good ideas, far less a communications exercise or a way of managing the Church. In principle, such discernment should be a continuous practice. It will never be concluded. At the very least, an initial listening period could be extended to include further prayer and reflection. A simple summary of 'what God might be saying' should be compiled (for such discernment is always tentative, at least at first, before it grows in its weight). Then, in the Anglican tradition, a particular role of the bishop is to articulate what is being heard, what Rowan Williams has described as the role of Interpreter, 'helping people make sense to and of each other'. In the case of a diocese, the process could therefore conclude, in this first instance, with the bishop offering their own sense and reflection.

One thing I am noticing is that this kind of godly listening and articulating leads to nothing short of delight among those engaged. It is not an easy process, but if we do believe the future belongs to God, such spiritual discernment is truly required.

Could it be that, in this sense, God is getting us where God needs us? This deeply disturbing, painful 'extended moment' may also be a great gift. If only we can let go of what we think we know, and listen deeply, we could be in for some surprises and no little change, but no less delight.

Steve Coneys

Mission and Growth Advisor





Listening & Discerning on the Way

Discernment in the New Testament

The word 'discernment' does not occur often in English translations of the Bible. In the NRSV translation of the New Testament, for example, there are seven uses of the root 'discern' in one form or other, six in Paul's letters to the Corinthians, and the other, perhaps the best known, in chapter 12 of his letter to the Romans. The word 'mission' occurs only once in the NRSV. Scripture is not a 'how-to textbook' for mission or for discernment, or for how to govern the Church. In these crucial areas – how we engage with the world around us, how we order the Church, how we discern God's direction for us, Christian faith has from its earliest years recognised the importance of being attentive to our time and place, to culture and setting. In all of these, responsiveness to the Spirit in the context in which we are set is the vital thing.

Few would deny that the whole thrust of the NT's account of following Jesus, of life in Christ, requires a capacity to recognise God's direction, and that this capacity is part of the gift that is the good news. The ability to discern God's guidance is given to us, it is not a result of our own effort. This is a faculty strongly associated with the Spirit of God, as it was in the life of God's people prior to the coming of Jesus. The practice of discernment in biblical terms is closely bound up with life in the Holy Spirit.

A natural place to turn is the gospels and their account of Jesus' ministry. How did he discern the Father's will? '...the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing, for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.' (John 5:19). As John V. Taylor comments, 'He knew only God and everything in God and God in all. And for him to live was to respond joyfully to that God and to do whatever at that moment perfectly reflected his Father's nature.' Jesus resembles to some extent the many other biblical leaders, prophets and others, both before and after him, who are reported as hearing clearly the voice of God directing them; we might see him as having this capacity in its most concentrated form. One of the most attractive features of Jesus as the gospel-writers present him is his spontaneous freedom.

We have to reckon with the reality that for most of us, the sense of direct and unmediated communication with the Father that Jesus implies is seriously impaired. Indeed, we are liable to treat with considerable suspicion those who claim to have heard something straight from God; and that chimes with the notion of 'testing' – or discerning – that is often present in NT letters: 'Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.' (1 John 4:1). Similarly, Paul writes of the gift of 'the discernment of spirits' (1 Cor 12:10).





If Jesus gives us a pattern for Spirit-filled discernment that we can hold before us as a goal, but which we know we fall short of, the Acts of the Apostles might be the best place to turn for a picture – not a complete one but a 'good enough' one – of how the first disciples begin to find God's way. Let us consider some aspects of the section from chapters 9-15:

By no means do we leave behind the biblical insistence on God's direct speech and action in the lives of those whom God calls. The two central directing moments in the dissemination of the gospel are the call of Saul on the Damascus road, and the vision of Peter leading him to Cornelius. Each of these are transforming interventions which the two saints have to make their own, to live out. But each requires also matching discernment on behalf of others, requires a sort of 'testing'. In the case of Paul's conversion, Ananias is given the word that overcomes his fear (described as a direct conversation with the Lord, though we tend to marvel at his courage, recognising that God does not efface his humanity); and then in Jerusalem, Barnabas takes the lead in allowing the frightened disciples to recognise God at work through Paul. He and they have to discern the genuineness of the Spirit's work in Paul, which must at first have been a risky business.

In the case of Peter and Cornelius, there is a coming together of vision and context: 'While Peter was still thinking about the vision [still 'greatly puzzled', v.16], the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down and go with them..."' (10:19f.) Peter's interpretation of what God is saying to him inwardly is worked out in correlation with what is happening around him. Next, the great new thing that he has discerned, 'God shows no partiality', has to be brought to the assembled believers in Jerusalem, heard and tested. 'When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God...' (11:18).

In amongst these descriptions of the faithful responding to remarkable words and actions of God, there is also account of more mundane decision making: 'News... came to the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch' (11:22) 'The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief...' (11:29); 'Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church [in Jerusalem], decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch...' (15:22). We are not told exactly how they came to these decisions. On one occasion as they take the next step in responding to what God seems to be doing, we are given a little more detail about their processes of discernment: 'While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."' (13:2).

We are also given a glimpse – strangely comforting, perhaps! – of differences of





discernment, in the disagreement between Barnabas and Paul with regard to John Mark as a companion (15:37-41), leading to a separation of ways and gospel journeys in different directions, Cyprus and Syria/Cilicia. We are told that the believers commended Paul to the grace of the Lord (v.40), but nothing about their attitude towards Barnabas and Mark as they sailed away to Cyprus.

Before that, the central episode in discerning the direction of the Church happens at the Council of Jerusalem. Here (15:1-21), there is another difference of discernment, between those who hold to the importance of circumcision and the law of Moses, and those who have begun to experience the conversion of Gentiles. There is a meeting 'together to consider this matter' (v.6), and there is 'much debate' (v.7). Leaders - Peter, Barnabas and Paul, and James - speak. The conclusion is voiced by James, though the strong impression is that this is a collective decision not to trouble the Gentiles who are turning to God. James quotes Scripture, from three different prophets, to recognise that there is precedent for other peoples seeking the Lord. Again there is a bringing together of their experience, of the way the Spirit has been seen to be working, with the tradition (which itself has to be interpreted – other, more exclusive texts could have been chosen).

As the Council ends and plans action to follow up that conclusion, we read that most fascinating clause, 'For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...' (15:28); how the Council reached this perception of what is good is not revealed in detail, but the phrase implies the kind of mutual attention to the Spirit's working, in a particular context, leading to a plan of action, that our current exercise in shared discernment intends.

We made mention at the start of Romans 12:2. 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect.' It is important here – something often overlooked in the NT in modern English, which has no distinction between singular and plural for the second person – to note that the 'you' who are to discern is plural.

The discernment of the will of God that flows from the transformation of renewed minds is a shared thing, is the task of the body of Christ together. One aspect of Paul's way of thinking about life in Christ as it is captured in the 'body' imagery, as elsewhere, is that there is a listening to each other expected, a mutual attentiveness of members to the constituent parts and thus to the whole.

This corporate nature of discernment, and the way it requires bringing together perception of what God is already beginning to do with our interpretation of our inheritance of faith –





attentiveness to the world around us and to our own resources in Scripture and history – is noteworthy.

Tim Naish

Canon Librarian, Canterbury Cathedral

Director of IME 2





Timetable

Month	Task	Deadline
August	<p>Churches: you have received this material and can ponder how to involve people and when to do so within the two loops.</p> <p>Individuals & families: Pray and ponder about how you will use the exercises in this resource to grow personal conversation with God</p>	End of August
September	<p>First discernment loop 18 days to engage people as widely as you can.</p> <p>Churches: prepare your concise summaries and send them in. We are looking for broad themes – use your own judgement. Prepare to feed back in online meetings for clergy and other facilitators.</p> <p>Individuals & families: spend some time personally or as a family ‘chatting and catching’ with God about the listening questions. What are you noticing, learning? What are we noticing about this process itself? Record your responses to feed back to your Church community and our diocese.</p>	<p>1 - 18 September</p> <p>22 September</p> <p>Meeting dates early Oct TBC</p>
October	<p>Bishop Rose will share with us her initial impressions of what we are hearing, and will encourage us to check out and deepen our local discernment in the second loop.</p>	12 October





Month	Task	Deadline
October/ November	<p>Second discernment loop Another period to reflect locally – and see how the ‘noticing’ and learning is developing.</p> <p>Individuals & families: spend some time as a family ‘chatting and catching’ with God about the listening questions again. Record what you are hearing from God to feed back to your Church community and our diocese.</p>	19 October - 6 November
November	<p>Prepare your concise summaries and send them in. Ponder on the effects of listening deeply like this.</p> <p>Bishop Rose and her team reflect on our Summaries.</p>	12 November 18 - 25 November
Advent Sunday	<p>Bishop Rose reflects with us. We may wonder how this journey and spirit will continue.</p>	29 November





Listening & Discerning on the Way Summary Form

Please record the main themes or phrases you have heard

An editable Word format version of this document is [available here](#) or you can fill it out and submit it [online here](#). Please email completed forms to listening@diocant.org by the deadlines (see below). Thank you.

What have we heard from children & from young people?

What are we noticing?

What are we learning?

What might we let go or allow to die, that we may enter a new future with God?

Deadlines for summaries:

First conversation loop: Tuesday 22 September

Second conversation loop: Thursday 12 November

