

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?

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