

EXPLORATIONS



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Do It Yourself Discernment

**Mike Croghan
Herndon, Virginia**

Since its beginning, the mission of Listening Hearts Ministries has been to make its accumulated wisdom on spiritual discernment available far and wide for the benefit of individuals, groups, and congregations seeking to hear God's voice in their midst. To that end, Listening Hearts facilitates retreats, workshops, and training programs; publishes books and this newsletter, *Explorations*; and has developed a library of online meditations called *Heartlinks*.

In February, we began a brand new project that will allow individuals and groups to dive right into practices of spiritual discernment with the aid of brief practical guides for applying this wisdom to specific circumstances in their lives. Called *Do It Yourself Discernment: Practical Outlines for All Occasions* (<http://blog.listeninghearts.org/practical>), this new resource has been launched and will be updated regularly, adding a new topic every six weeks.

Perhaps you are part of a small group that would like together to reflect deeply on a passage of Scripture, a book, or a movie. Or you may be in a group that needs to consider a proposal or brainstorm a way forward through a shared challenge. Possibly you are on a team that needs to prayerfully plan a liturgy, a retreat, or some other event. If so, then you may want to try our first offering entitled, "How to Structure Small Groups for In-Depth Sharing." We believe it can be of great practical use.

If your group needs to tackle an issue that is thorny, then take a look at our second posting, "How to Achieve Group Consensus Around a Difficult Issue." This outline provides brief yet detailed ways to structure your group so as to be open to the Spirit and move toward a shared sense of clarity, even if the issue is contentious.

(continued on next page)

Another title on the horizon is “How to Structure a Contemplative Discussion in Place of a Sermon in a Liturgical Worship Service.” Future topics include guidelines for personal discernment around issues such as navigating personal relationships with young children, teenagers, adult children, and aging parents, and concerns relating to marriage and divorce. Other titles are geared to clergy facing a transition or meeting with families to plan weddings or funerals.

Individuals and groups will be able to download these guidelines, make copies as needed, and apply them to real, everyday situations in their personal, family, and communal lives right away. The outlines can be used even if you’re not familiar with Listening Hearts books or training programs, though they serve as an invitation to further explore the wisdom and practical value of the resources of Listening Hearts Ministries. Above all, *Practical Outlines for All Occasions* creates an environment of hospitality for the Spirit and guides us in the challenges that confront us in our day-to-day lives.

Mike Croghan is a member of the Church of the Holy Comforter (Episcopal) in Vienna, VA, and a member of the leadership team of the Church of the Common Table, a trans-denominational community of seekers looking for new ways to be the Church. He serves on the board of trustees of Listening Hearts Ministries.

Creating a Spiritual Tapestry

**The Rev. Dr. Rosemary Beales
Alexandria, Virginia**

Experiencing two days of Listening Hearts meditative exercises was more than a refreshing recharge of my spirit. It was also a homecoming. Fifteen years ago, *Listening Hearts*, the program’s first book, played a critical role in my attending to the first faint whispers of a call to priesthood, and I returned to that powerful little book often through the long journey toward ordination. Now, seven years into this life, I was attending a clergy conference led by Suzanne Farnham for the Diocese of Virginia.

As a school chaplain, I had to do a lot of arranging and rearranging to be away for two weekdays, and hoped it would be worth it. Emphatically it was.

The retreat fed my spirit through guided reflections that combined short passages of Scripture — always essential for grounding in God — with wisdom from *Keeping in Tune with God*, specifically directed to those charged with the care of souls. Suzanne helped us care for our own souls first. She offered the perfect blend of solo and small-group exercises, with gentle leadership that did not insist on revealing anything we did not want to share with the group. Although not a visual artist myself, I enjoyed doodling reflectively as a form of prayer. Writing a poem/prayer came more naturally. Handling a stiff block of clay, though, led to my most personal insight, as I reflected on how I had to hold and warm the clay, waiting patiently for it to be malleable: Doesn’t God show extraordinary patience doing the same with me? Weaving and looping through all these diverse experiences was the rich thread of silence, creating a tapestry that will last long beyond the retreat itself.

The Rev. Dr. Rosemary Beales is chaplain to the Lower School at St. Stephen’s & St. Agnes (Episcopal) School in Alexandria, VA, serves at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Old Town Alexandria, and is a Godly Play trainer. A former journalist, she gave up telling the news and finds great joy in sharing the Good News.

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“One Step Enough for Me”

Joe Gill
Baltimore, Maryland

This past year I hit the "double nickel," the midpoint between ages 50 and 60, two score and fifteen. Passages of time usually are seen in numbers—turning 30, for example. Lately, a renumbering is afoot: 30 is the new 20, 40 the new 30, and so forth. If not numbers, time is about stages: youth, adulthood, middle age, and old age. This is linear time, time in a line.

Eternal time is different. In eternal time, our life is a timeless journey with God. Living in eternal time is like driving an automobile late at night, on a road that we have not driven before. We follow the headlights projecting the road in front us; we discover the way as we go. On this road, people, events, and experiences will come into our lives; our response to them is our response to God. *Listening Hearts* uses the images of driving at night and following the Light to describe discernment, a life lived as a journey with God. On the journey, ages and stages of life fade, giving way to an eternal Light that illumines the road ahead.



Fifty-five, all things being equal, is not a bad time to look back—and forward. On the road ahead, there is work for us to do. Called by God, our life is not about us. It is about hearing God and discovering how we are uniquely called to care for God’s Kingdom. “I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me,” says Jesus in John’s Gospel. God has work for us to do! Our neighbors, fellow workers or worshipers, our family and friends—all are placed on our path and given to us. Meeting, greeting and caring for strangers are special occasions for discovery of God’s call.

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Listening Hearts Ministries provides a range of programs, publications, and services that teach people the practice of spiritual discernment through prayerful listening in supportive communities.

Discernment does not imply fully comprehending God's will, but rather it raises the question, What is the next step God wants me to take?

—Listening Hearts, p. 23

Prayer is the well-trodden path to hearing God. I once viewed prayer as time set aside; older now, I know that God wants us to pray all the time. “Pray unceasingly,” St. Paul tells us. Prayer is as simple as bringing to mind the Lord our God, or holding others before God. Prayer is quiet repetition, as in the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Or prayer may be silence, and solitude, and deep breathing, as in the breath of the Spirit of God. Prayer culminates in deeds: hearing God's call to respond to God's people, caring for those who are given to us on our own journey.

No longer do I imagine this journey as a long trek across great time and distances. In his most famous hymn, Cardinal John Henry Newman wrote, “Lead kindly Light...lead thou me on...I do not ask to see the distant scene; one step enough for me.” The root word for journey, the French *jour*, means “day.” A journey is a day's travel, taking each step as the day unfolds, prayerfully awaiting the people, events, and experiences that call us into God's service.

Joe Gill, trustee of Listening Hearts Ministries, is Secretary of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. He is a coauthor of *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*.