

EXPLORATIONS



Phone: 410-366-1851
Fax: 410-243-7062
www.listeninghearts.org
<http://blog.listeninghearts.org>



Board of Trustees

Patricia Brown
Barbara Cates
Mike Croghan
Alice Dorrance
Suzanne Farnham
Joseph P. Gill
The Rev. Timothy Grayson
The Rev. Nathan LeRud
R. Taylor McLean
Frances Sullinger



Founder

Suzanne Farnham

Client Development & Evangelism

The Rev. Monique A. Ellison

Communications

Laura McGuire

Office Manager

Sue Wenzlick



Inside this Issue

In the Light of God's Presence

R. Taylor McLean

A Gift of Insight and Calm

Edward Mortimore

Formulating a Question for Discernment

from the LHM website

In the Light of God's Presence

**R. Taylor McLean
Baltimore, MD**

Listening Hearts has been on an evolving journey since its beginning in the late 1980s. There is one aspect of that evolution that I would like to say something about here.

Initially, the ministry gave its principal attention to helping an individual Christian explore a personal sense of a call from God. Much of the text and appendices of *Listening Hearts* is devoted to encouraging and enabling such an exploration. This continues to be a central part of our ministry.

However, there is another aspect of call, applicable to all God's people, which has increasingly attracted my attention over the years. God's people need to live close to the Lord if they are going to be his useful people. Jesus was unequivocal on the point, saying, "I am the vine and you are the branches . . . Those who abide in me and I in them, those are the ones who bear much fruit, for without me you can do nothing." And here we know from history that "nothing" can be a euphemism for some very bad things indeed. Just as Jesus came to do the Father's will on earth and maintained the closest relationship with him to that end, so the church is called to be God's useful people by maintaining a close, personal relationship with the living Lord, who abides with us now. Only in such a relationship can the church truly be the body of Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from prison a few months before he was hanged, put it this way: "It is certain that we can always live close to God and in the light of His presence." It is this living "in the light of His presence" that informs and empowers the church to become God's useful people. It is a general call for all of the church.

Continued on page 2

St. Paul, perhaps more than any other writer, repeatedly used the phrase “in the Lord” or “in him,” and he expanded on the meaning of these words in a number of ways. For instance, he says we are called to “belong” to Jesus Christ in order that we may “bear fruit for God” (Romans); you were called “into the fellowship of his son” (1 Corinthians); “for what we preach is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord . . . so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (2 Corinthians); “I am again in travail until Christ is formed in you!” (Galatians); for we are Christ’s workmanship created in Him for good works (Ephesians), “filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ” (Philippians); you received Christ Jesus the Lord, “so live in Him” (Colossians). For Paul, who never met Jesus before his ascension, knowledge about the Jesus of history is no substitute for abiding in the risen Lord, himself. To remain effective, such abiding requires an ongoing spiritual encounter between the Christian and the Lord. Otherwise the relationship dissipates.

By meeting fellow seekers, we may well be witnesses to the presence of God and reflect it to each other.

This radically God-centered relationship for all of God’s people, which must continually be developed, may lead an individual to explore a sense of a particular call, such as those which Listening Hearts Ministries has addressed from the start.

What if some of us have no experience of Jesus as the Lord who is living now and who calls us to abide “in him”? Well, there is no formula to follow as I see it, but true to the guiding principles of Listening Hearts, seeking, knocking, asking *in community* may be a good starting point. By meeting fellow seekers, we may well be witnesses to the presence of God and reflect it to each other. This can result in a powerful encounter with the living Lord for all involved. I remember reading, some decades ago, that to ignore the Bible is essentially to ignore Jesus. Read prayerfully, the Bible is essential to our search for the Lord himself. In the witness and command of Jesus, and the experiences of St. Paul and Bonhoeffer, we have strong authority for seeking to know the living Lord personally.

The call to all the church to live close to God and “in the light of God’s presence” is a growing emphasis for Listening Hearts Ministries. God has work for his people to do, but without this mutual indwelling, we can do nothing.

R. Taylor McLean, one of the authors of both Listening Hearts and Grounded in God, has been active in Listening Hearts Ministries since its inception.

A Gift of Insight and Calm

**Edward Mortimore
Baltimore, MD**

I have been part of Listening Hearts for nearly twenty-five years, participating in discernment groups from time to time. The core principles of Listening Hearts discernment have thoroughly seeped into me. This began with a lot of exposure to the Listening Hearts procedures at the start of my journey in discernment. When I trained as a discerner, it was in the early days of the program, when it was still called the Christian Vocation Project. My parish, Memorial Episcopal Church in Baltimore, embraced the Listening Hearts principles. Committees, including the vestry, adopted decision making by consensus. The parish introduced more periods of silence into the liturgy. This immersion into contemplative practices heavily guided my church experience and spiritual life.

This discernment process continues to amaze me. The questions brought by focus persons for discernment vary widely, some quite specific and some reflecting a hazier sense of God's call. Many questions are vocational on the surface but more complicated beneath. In my experience, no question remains unaltered through the discernment process. Listening Hearts discernment invariably leads to an unfolding of the question and a transformation of both the focus person and those seeking to understand and respond to that question. What emerges from this process is unexpected and filled with Grace. It reminds us, as the Quakers know, that each of us has direct access to God. The tricky part is listening for God's voice. That is where Listening Hearts is so profound and so helpful. It helps us create and hold a space in which to open ourselves to God's voice, to borrow author Parker Palmer's description.

Listening Hearts discernment invariably leads to an unfolding of the question and a transformation of both the focus person and those seeking to understand and respond to that question.

Here is an illustration of how the Listening Hearts discernment process works: Recently I had an opportunity to be part of a discernment group whose members had never before worked together. In this particular session, the focus person presented a deeply thought out question, but one that could easily have led the discerners to give advice rather than listen reflectively. Because everyone in the group was experienced in the Listening Hearts approach, the discerners instinctively stayed with the process. After an initial period of general questioning, one of the discerners asked the focus person to quietly hold the discernment question in her heart and to let an image arise. So, following a stretch of prayerful silence, the focus person described a vivid and powerful image. This image enabled her to see the question from a different perspective, bringing new clarity and hope. It also stimulated new questions that led to further insight. In fact, the image was so strong and helpful that it carried through to the next session, changing slightly as new clarity emerged.

Previously, although the focus person had prayed at great length about the discernment question and had considered it carefully from many perspectives, only when the four of us sat in prayer, listening and posing questions, did this image spring forth, a creative uplifting gift that yielded insight and calm.

Edward Mortimore trained as a Listening Hearts volunteer in the 1990s; it has strongly influenced his spiritual journey since.

LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES
MEMORIAL EPISCOPAL CHURCH
1407 BOLTON STREET
BALTIMORE, MD 21217-4202

Non-Profit Org.
U S Postage
PAID
Baltimore, MD
Permit no. 5360

MISSION STATEMENT

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.

For those who steadfastly journey with God, the veil of reality may at times fall back to reveal the glory that underlines all things.

—Keeping in Tune with God, p.19

Formulating a Question for Discernment

Good spiritual discernment begins with discerning the question. The desire for the discernment comes from a gnawing concern, one that you have been pondering but unable to resolve. How you word your question will pave the way for all that follows. If you let prayer help shape your discernment question, you yourself will undergo a subtle transformation in the process.

The first step is to hold your concern in centered silence for at least ten minutes, with your thoughts and feelings suspended. After that, begin to word the question by addressing it to God: “God, how would you have me . . .?” This gets it out of your head where it is in your own control and into your spiritual heart, your gut, ready to be informed by the Spirit.

The next step is to word the question so that it is open-ended, hospitable to new possibilities beyond what you currently perceive, so that you are available to be taken to new vistas and see new things. That means no multiple choice questions and no “yes” or “no” questions. Such questions hem God in and hem you in as well.

Then continue in a prayerful mode until the question becomes a single interrogatory sentence that is clearly focused and open-ended. In spiritual discernment you are looking not for pat answers or blueprints but for signs that point the direction and illuminate the path ahead.

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves.

- Rainer Maria Rilke