

Discernment and Sabbath: How they work together to liberate us in connecting with God/self/other

Having explored Sabbath throughout scripture, within the Christian tradition, and in our own practices we now come to a time where we invite you all to discern what Sabbath means for us as a church community and for you as an individual or with those in your lives. Over a two-month period of time we invite you to utilize one, two, three, or all four of the discernment practices highlighted in this booklet to explore how we can practice Sabbath in communal ways and within our personal lives.

For many, as we learned from our Sabbath study, Sabbath has become a habit or is anchored to a physical location - like the church building - and with changing schedules, Covid-19 safety measures, among other life dynamics, our Sabbath practices may be inaccessible or not as lifegiving as they once were.

So why use discernment practices to explore what Sabbath can mean or look like for us in times such as these? With so many unknowns in life, these days it can feel like there is little anchoring us to Sabbath and it can be difficult to know where to begin. “Discernment of spirits is the interpretation of what St. Ignatius Loyola called the “motions of the soul.” These interior movements consist of thoughts, imaginings, emotions, inclinations, desires, feelings, repulsions, and attractions. Spiritual discernment of spirits involves becoming sensitive to these movements, reflecting on them, and understanding where they come from and where they lead us.”¹

The discernment processes outlined in this study are the St. Ignatius eight stages, the Wesleyan quadrilateral, the Quaker Clearness Committee, and the Ignatian Examen. While these approaches to discernment are not the

¹ <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/making-good-decisions/discernment-of-spirits/>

only approaches to discernment, they may be helpful if you have not taken part in an intentional discernment process before. I also acknowledge that the overviews of these discernment processes are not exhaustive but will hopefully provide you with enough information to begin practicing any of them.

If you wish to practice all four of the discernment models you might consider spacing them out. For example, the St. Ignatius' eight stages in August, the Wesleyan model in September, the Clearness Committee in October, and the Examen in November.

Following the overview of the four discernment processes there are quotes and prompts on Sabbath to deepen your exploration. These are merely options, and if they are not helpful in your discernment of Sabbath practice, you may utilize your own ideas.

St. Ignatius' principles for the discernment of spirits.²

Stage One: The Preparation

- Begin in silent prayer.
- When you think from your deepest, truest self, what is your burning desire in life right now? (Keep it concrete, and be as specific as you can be.)
- Write this desire somewhere.
- Reflect on this desire.
 - What do you notice?
 - Does a question for discernment emerge for you? Is there a choice facing you that needs to be made?
- Develop a discernment QUESTION. It needs to be relatively concrete and specific. Keep the focus on what GOD is inviting you to be or do. Examples of specific and concrete questions:

Is it time to leave this job for another one?

Is it God's desire that I get more education?

Is God leading me to deepen a current relationship? And if so, in what way?



Stage Two: Holy Indifference to Outcome

Can you be at peace with whatever God shows you in this discernment, regardless of the outcome? If not, ask God to give you that peace.

² <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/spiritualdirection101/2012/07/a-step-by-step-discernment-process/>

- Do you desire to know what God wants in this situation? If there is a fear or a block, acknowledge it and ask God for help.

Stage Three: Practical Considerations

- What are the facts surrounding the question?
- What are the practical considerations?
- What are the options for answering the question?
- Pros and cons for each option?
- What beliefs and values affect this question?

Stage Four: Considering Intuition and Felt Senses

- In silent prayer (allow 20 minutes if possible), listen to your intuition around the options you face in answering the question. If you need to walk around or stretch or go outside, please do so.
- In silence, listen to your body's "felt senses."
 - Are your muscles tense, how's your breathing, etc.
- Make a note of how your body is leaning on this question. Write about your "gut feelings."

Stage Five: Using Your Imagination

- Imagine standing before God (or Jesus) to explain the decision you made on the question. Imagine explaining each option to God. What do you imagine God's reaction to be? Allow at least 20 minutes for the imagination prayer.
- Imagine your best friend is facing this same question. What advice would you give your friend?
- Imagine you are very old and looking back on this discernment. What choice do you imagine you would have wanted to make?

Stage Six: Make the Choice

- You have considered facts, intuition, imagination, and have prayed. Now it's time to make the choice. Search for which way *you* feel God is leading. What choice feels like the one that God desires?
- As you make the choice, contemplatively sit with and reflect upon the following questions:
 - Where do I feel consolation³ around this choice?
 - Where do I feel desolation⁴ around this choice?

Stage Seven: Take the Action & Evaluate

- Reflect on this choice for an appropriate amount of time and see if you feel consolation or desolation around the choice. What is the fruit of the Spirits⁵? Continue to keep the choice in prayer.
- At some point, discernment always leads to action. So you have to take the leap of faith. Set a time frame for doing that, and tell someone you trust if that will help you with accountability.
- After taking the leap and making the action, notice the early outcome. Does the discernment need revisiting? (It's not a sign of failure if it does—discernment is spiritual art and mystery, not science!)
- Keep praying and listening to your deepest, greatest desires.
- Keep using principles of discernment for making faithful choices. Tweak the process if need be—make it yours.

³ the comfort received by a person after a loss or disappointment.

⁴ a state of complete emptiness or destruction.

⁵ love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control

Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Discernment⁶



Begin with a specific question of what it is you want clarity on.

Spend time in prayer. Talk to God about this question. Ask God to be especially present to you as you consider the “points” of the quad.

- *Scripture* – Consider your discernment question. What, if anything, does scripture have to say about it? Consider the theme of the question. Look the theme up in a concordance. Or consider biblical stories that may shed light on your question. What guidance does God’s word have for you in this matter?
- *Tradition* — What does the history of Christianity have to say about your question? What do your statements of faith have to say? How have Christians in the past made similar decisions? What do your trusted friends have to say about the question? If you have a spiritual director, what is their response to your question?
- *Reason* – Think your question through. What is the rational course of action? What in this matter do you know to be true and not true? List the pros and cons of all the options you have in this question.
- *Experience* – Based on your past experience of God and what God desires for you, how are you feeling led to act in this matter? Where

⁶ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/spiritualdirection101/2012/08/discernment-wesley-style/>

is God's presence most deeply felt when you consider this question?
What emotions come up for you?

After putting your discernment question through all four "points" of the quad, reflect on which "point" was most helpful for you. Which point seemed the most difficult? How are you feeling about the question? Does a direction emerge?

You can always go back to the quad for more discernment after you make your choice. Once you visually memorize the four sides of the quad, you can use this method without any reference material at all.

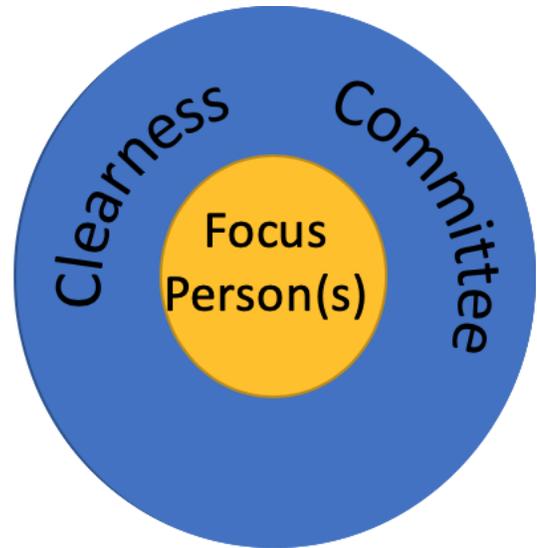
Quaker Clearness Committee⁷

(This one will be difficult to do during Covid Safety Measures but it can be done on-line with folks or potentially over several sessions in a social distanced manner outside. If you wish to do this particular discernment practice, I would be happy to help navigate logistics for you to ensure all are safe while discerning together. This could be a meaningful practice for any group at Calvary (church school class, GPS group) or with trusted friends & family.)

What is a Quaker Clearness Committee?

Say a young Quaker couple wants to get married. They are advised to be part of what is called a “Clearness Committee,” a group of wise and trusted members of the meeting convened to pray in silence and ask them honest, open-ended questions that help them “become clear” about the way forward in their relationship. In the same way, the Quaker meeting (local gathering) might go into a Clearness Committee

around an important question facing their church. The goal is to find unity within the greater body before taking the next step. Not everyone has to agree wholeheartedly, but for unity to be found, everyone has to agree that the Spirit seems to be moving the group in one particular direction. In the Clearness Committee the individual or couple would be known as the focus person(s).



The Clearness Committee is not a cure-all. It is not for extremely fragile people or for extremely delicate problems. But for the right person, with the right issue, it is a powerful way to rally the strength of community around a struggling soul, to draw deeply from the wisdom within all of us. It teaches us to abandon the pretense that we know what is best for another person and instead to ask those honest and open questions that can help that person find their answers. It teaches us to give up the arrogant

⁷ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/spiritualdirection101/2012/07/discernment-in-community-quaker-style/>

assumption that we are obliged to “save” each other and learn, through simple listening, to create the conditions that allow a person to find their wholeness within. If the spiritual discipline behind the Clearness Committee is understood and practiced, the process can become a way to renew community in our individualistic times; a way to free people from their isolation without threatening their integrity; a way to counteract the unhelpful excesses to which we sometimes take “caring;” and a way to create space for the Spirit to move among us with healing and with power.

Guidelines for facilitating Clearness Committees at retreats:⁸

1. Facilitators assign members to committees. But before doing so, ask each focus person for a confidential list of any persons they especially want to work with or feels unable to work with. Promise focus persons they will be given as many names from the first list as possible, and none from the second list.
2. Focus persons are asked to reflect on the following three areas:
 - a concise statement of the problem, even if it is not clear—this process can work as well with murky issues as with clear ones
 - a recounting of relevant background factors that may bear on the problem
 - an exploration of any hunches the focus person may have about what’s on the horizon regarding the problem

This is done so that the focus person can present their problem orally to the committee at the start of the session in a concise but helpful way, ten or fifteen minutes maximum.

3. Clearness Committees last two hours. A detailed schedule is provided to all committee members before the process begins. When

⁸ <http://www.couragerenewal.org/clearnesscommittee>

fifteen, and then five minutes remain, someone on the committee needs to notify the others, for reasons explained in note 8 below. Committee members for whom note-taking enhances attentiveness may take notes, turning them over to the focus person before leaving the room. This helps guarantee confidentiality and is a great gift to the focus person, helping them remember the questions and answers in the hours, days, and months to come.

4. The meeting begins when the focus person breaks the silence, and gives a brief summary of the issue at hand. (see step 2) Then the committee members may speak—but everything they say is governed by one rule, a simple rule and yet one that most people find difficult and demanding: members are forbidden to speak to the focus person in any way except to ask honest, open questions. This means absolutely no advice and no amateur psychoanalysis. It means no, “Why don’t you...?” It means no, “That happened to me one time, and here’s what I did...” It means no, “There’s a book/therapist/exercise/diet that would help you a lot.” Nothing is allowed except real questions, honest and open questions, questions that will help the focus person remove the blocks to that person’s inner truth without becoming burdened by the personal agendas of committee members. Someone may think they know the answer to your problem, and on rare occasions they may be right. But their answer is absolutely no value to you. The only answer that counts is one that arises from your own inner truth. The discipline of the Clearness Committee is to give you greater access to that truth and allow you to have a personal dialogue with it—while the rest of us refrain from trying to define that truth for you or guide that dialogue.

5. What is an honest, open question? It is important to reflect on this, since we are so skilled at asking questions that are advice or analysis in disguise; e.g., “Have you ever thought that it might be your mother’s fault?” The best single mark of an honest, open question is

that the questioner could not possibly anticipate the answer to it; e.g., “Did you ever feel like this before?” There are other guidelines for good questioning. Try not to get ahead of the focus person’s language; e.g., “What did you mean when you said ‘frustrated’?” is a good question, but “Didn’t you feel angry?” is not. Ask questions aimed at helping the focus person rather than at satisfying your curiosity. Ask questions that are brief and to the point rather than loading them with background considerations and rationale—which make the question into a speech. Ask questions that go to the person as well as the problem—for example, questions about feelings as well as about facts. Trust your intuition in asking questions, even if your instinct seems off the wall; e.g., “What color is your present job, and what color is the one you have been offered?”

6. Normally, the focus person responds to the questions as they are asked, in the presence of the group, and those responses generate more, and deeper, questions. Though the responses should be full, they should not be terribly long—resist the temptation to tell your life story in response to every question. It is important that there be time for more and more questions and responses, thus deepening the process for everyone. The more often a focus person is willing to answer aloud, the more material the person—and the committee—will have to work with. But this should never happen at the expense of the focus person’s need to protect vulnerable feelings or to maintain privacy. It is vital that the focus person assume total power to set the limits of the process. So everyone must understand that the focus person at all times has the right not to answer a question. The unanswered question is not necessarily lost—indeed, it may be the question that is so important that it keeps working on the focus person long after the Clearness Committee has ended.

7. The Clearness Committee must not become a grilling or cross-examination. The pace of the questioning is crucial—it should be

relaxed, gentle, humane. A continual volley of questions makes reflection impossible and leaves the focus person feeling attacked rather than evoked. Do not be afraid of silence in the group—trust it and treasure it. If silence falls, it does not mean that nothing is happening or that the process has broken down. It may well mean that the most important thing of all is happening: new insights are emerging from within people, from their deepest sources of guidance.

8. From the beginning to the end of the Clearness Committee, it is important that everyone work hard to remain totally attentive to the focus person and their needs. This means suspending the normal rules of social gathering—no chitchat, no responding to other people's questions or to the focus person's answers, no joking to break the tension, no noisy and nervous laughter. We are simply to surround the focus person with quiet, loving space, resisting even the temptation to comfort or reassure or encourage this person, but simply being present with our attention and our questions and our care. If a committee member damages this ambiance with advice, leading questions, or rapid-fire inquisition, other members, including the focus person, have the right to remind that member of the rules—and that member is not at liberty to mount a defense or argue the point. The Clearness Committee is for the sake of the focus person, and the rest of us need to get our egos to recede.

9. The Clearness Committee should run for the full time allotted. Don't end early for fear that the group has "run out of questions"—patient waiting will be rewarded with deeper questions than have yet been asked. About fifteen minutes before the end of the meeting, someone should ask the focus person if he or she wants to suspend the "questions only" rule and invite committee members to mirror back what they have heard the focus person saying. If the focus person says no, the questions continue, but if they says yes, mirroring can

begin, along with more questions if they should arise. Mirroring does not provide an excuse to give advice or fix the person—that sort of invasiveness is still prohibited. Mirroring simply means exactly what the word suggests: reflecting the focus person’s language—and body language—giving him or her a chance to say, “Yes, that’s me” or “No, that’s not,” though no response is required. In the final five minutes of the meeting, the time keeper should invite members to celebrate and affirm the focus person and their strengths. This is an important time, since the focus person has just spent a couple of hours being very vulnerable. And there is always much to celebrate, for in the course of a Clearness Committee, people reveal the gifts and graces that characterize human beings at their deepest and best.

10. Remember, the Clearness Committee is not intended to fix the focus person, so there should be no sense of letdown if the focus person does not have their problems “solved” when the process ends. A good clearness process does not end—it keeps working within the focus person long after the meeting is over. The rest of us need simply to keep holding that person in the Light, as they trust the wisdom of their inner teacher.

Ignatian Examen for Discernment⁹

crafting the question	taking a pause
set the question aside	do an examen with the theme
returning to the original question	

This is a simple spiritual practice you can do when sitting with a choice you need to make. It's based on the ancient practice of the Ignatian Examen, a prayer where you take a reflective look at where you are most spiritually energized and where you are least energized (and that's just one way to do it — there are hundreds of variations, but this one is helpful for discernment).

Craft the Question

Let's say you are trying to decide whether or not to apply for a job you saw advertised that had an intriguing profile. Your question needs to be simple. An uncomplicated, easy-to-understand and concrete question will be more helpful in your discernment. Something like: Do I apply for this intriguing job?

Take a Pause

Take a moment to write this question in your journal, on your smartphone, on a sticky note or index card. An index card is nice because you can jot notes on the back of the card if need be and stick it in a book, bag or pocket.

⁹ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/spiritualdirection101/2019/10/sitting-with-a-choice-discernment-through-ignatian-examen/>

Spend a few moments in silence, inviting God to assist you as enter this prayer practice.

Name the Theme

We'll get back to the question in a moment, but for now, put the question away. But take note of the theme of the question. If your question is "Do I apply for this intriguing job?", the theme would be "work I enjoy doing."

Do an Examen with the theme

Staying in a calm prayer mode, ask God to help you reflect upon:

1. If you could relive any moment of joy and energy at work from your recent past, what would that be? Pick just one. In what moment recently did you find the most joy in work? What task were you doing? What, in particular did you like about the task? How did it make your body feel? Who were you with? Where were you? Make note of what you discover as you pray with these questions.
2. If you could get a "do over" of any moment at work that disturbed your inner peace, what would you want to do over? Pick just one. What moment drained you of energy, frustrated you, or put you on "high alert?" What task was involved? What, in particular did you dislike about the task? How did the moment make your body feel? Who were you with? Where were you? Again, make note of whatever comes to you as insight or understanding.
3. Look over what you noticed from your moment of joy and energy, and from your moment of upset and disturbance of energy. Take some silence, asking God to offer you whatever you need: instruction, comfort, challenge, or creativity related to these two moments.

Return to the original question

Now, pick up the question you wrote at the beginning of the exercise. How does the Prayer of Examen which you just did inform *that* question?

Using our example, does what you learned from praying with your high and low points at work offer you any direction on whether or not you want to apply for the intriguing job? Are you leaning more one way or another? Do you feel any more clarity on an answer?

Don't berate yourself if the answer to those questions is no. The Examen seems to offer the most discernment assistance to those who use it regularly, so you may want to repeat this prayer daily until you reach some clarity.

If your question is time sensitive — as many job-related questions can be — you may have to decide before you have the level of clarity you really desire. But you can continue to ask yourself Examen-like questions during the process.

It's all about Inquiry

Reflection, a key component of the spiritual practice of discernment, is all about asking yourself the right open-ended questions. The more you use the Examen alongside key discernment questions, the more comfortable you get with deep and soul-searching inquiry.

Scripture to reflect upon before, during, or after your discernment time.

Genesis 2:1-3

“Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.”

Exodus 20:8-11

“Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.”

Matthew 12:1-8

At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and yet are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”

A Quote from Abraham Heschel to Close out our discernment on Sabbath

Shabbat comes with its own holiness; we enter not simply a day, but an atmosphere. My father cites the Zohar: the Sabbath is the name of God. We are within the Sabbath rather than the Sabbath being within us. For my father, the question is how to perceive that holiness: not how much to observe, but how to observe. Strict adherence to the laws regulating Sabbath observance doesn't suffice; the goal is creating the Sabbath as a foretaste of paradise. The Sabbath is a metaphor for paradise and a testimony to God's presence; in our prayers, we anticipate a messianic era that will be a Sabbath, and each Shabbat prepares us for that experience: "Unless one learns how to relish the taste of Sabbath ... one will be unable to enjoy the taste of eternity in the world to come." It was on the seventh day that God gave the world a soul, and "[the world's] survival depends upon the holiness of the seventh day." The task, he writes, becomes how to convert time into eternity, how to fill our time with spirit: "Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else.

- Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

Sabbath Prompts to Spark Discernment Focus

1. If Sabbath is the first thing in scripture to be called holy, what does it mean for you to keep Sabbath holy as we are told in the ten commandments?
2. Sabbath is not something we fit into our work week, but rather we fit work into our Sabbath. If this is true, how might you practice sabbath differently moving forward?
3. Sabbath is not anchored to a place but rather in scripture we see it designated to a time. How might you block out specific time for Sabbath - regardless of where it happens?
4. Sabbath was started as a liberation experience for the Israelites who were enslaved and only valued by their ability to produce bricks for Pharaoh. Knowing that Sabbath started to ensure people were valued as beloved children of God and so that they could connect with God, how might you carry on this origin of Sabbath in your practices today?
5. Sabbath is not something we take but something we give. How might you work to give sabbath to others and strive for all to have the freedom to practice this holy time?
6. The word for “still” in Psalm 23 (the Lord leads me beside still waters) shares the same origin word as Sabbath - *Menuah*, which means it could be read as “the Lord leads me beside Sabbath waters”. How might you view your Sabbath practice as God leading you to stillness? Does that open you to new ways of practicing Sabbath?
7. If Scripture tells you that God rested on the seventh day and made the Sabbath day holy, you see God create this designation in time for you to frame our work. With God creating Sabbath for humanity, how does that free you to see Sabbath as a necessary practice for you to thrive rather than as something you need to feel guilty about for observing or as

something to try to cram in your week? What liberation to your work might Sabbath bring?

**when the word "work" is used this is in reference to anything other than practicing Sabbath. It is not meant solely as a designation of a job.*