



4 WEEKS/4 QUESTIONS: A GUIDE FOR DISCERNMENT

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FOUR WEEKS OF DISCERNMENT: A GUIDE

On May 7, 2023 the congregations will receive the Credence report and hear the ideas for collaboration that came out of the listening process. We invite you to reflect on 4 discernment questions during the month of May. These questions are rooted in the priorities that arose from the process thus far, and lead toward clarity about a future action plan. The needs/priorities that have arisen thus far are: deepened spirituality, shared outreach, strengthened relationships, and the need to engage more deeply with Youth.

- 1. Drawn by love (rather than trying to “secure” the future):** The possibility of being drawn into the future by love captures our imagination. We know we can become mired in fear and anxiety about things like finances and the loss of younger people. Yet we also know, by experience, that money follows vision. We need a new vision for changing times that is rooted in love for God, trust in God’s Spirit, and that allows our spirits to sing. **Questions for Reflection:** *What kinds of things that we do now strengthen our awareness of God’s creative presence here right now, and strengthen our trust in God’s loving purpose for the future? What further (specific) steps could we take that deepen our relationship with God and give us courage to trust God’s leading?*
Alternative: *If we were rooted in love and drawn by love, what would we keep doing? What might we stop doing? What might we start doing?*
- 2. Outreach that builds on our strengths:** We are aging and have less energy for hands-on work, but we also have strengths. We are deeply rooted in the Fredericton community; we have the ability to write and persuade; we are able to have civil conversations that are respectful. These may be gifts that we can offer to the larger community. We also have theological and spiritual resources. **Questions for Reflection:** *What are some possible (specific) ways to focus the energy of our two congregations and build on these strengths to focus our mission in Fredericton? What type of mission initiative for the city of Fredericton can we envision? What are some innovative ways to sustain hands-on work while taking into account our waning energies?*
- 3. Building Relationships:** People in both congregations express how much they have enjoyed the joint conversations thus far, getting to know people in the other congregation, feeling heard, discovering common needs and issues. It gives us energy and hope; we enjoy the stimulation of the diversity. Each congregation has gifts to share. **Questions for Reflection:** *What are some specific ways to strengthen the relationship between the two congregations that build on this energy and are “drawn by love”? (Try to be specific)*
- 4. Youth:** We recognize that as congregations we do not engage with youth as much as we engage with seniors. Yet we love the children, youth and younger families in our midst. We know we can’t “get” Youth, but there may be changes we can make that would make our congregations more inviting, and express more clearly how we value younger people. **Questions for Reflection:** *What needs to be true about us if we want to be the kind of church that invites and engages youth? What specific changes are we willing to make?*

GUIDE TO DISCERNMENT

What is discernment? A common method to make group decisions is to gather up proposals and supporting arguments, try to convince each other about our ideas, and then take a vote.

Discernment is a more reflective process, in which we seek to set aside our desire to control the outcome by persuading others of the rightness of our view. We rather seek to listen for the Spirit of God, listen to our own “inner wisdom” as well as listen to the collective vision of the community as we move in the direction of God’s call. Discernment engages our spirit, our intellect, our imagination, our intuition and reaches into the heart of our beliefs about God, ourselves, and all of creation.

Whereas decision-making can be an intellectual exercise (which is sometimes necessary), discernment is about accessing wisdom.

Purpose of these 4 weeks: You are being asked to spend intentional time praying for the congregations and listening for God’s leading. *We want to bring the congregations’ longings, hopes and dreams to God, opening our hearts, minds, and spirits, allowing God’s Spirit to speak to us and through us regarding how we are being called as congregations.* We do not want to assume a direction. Instead, we want to listen for a direction even as we honour our own longings regarding the churches’ direction.

Our purpose is also to open ourselves to being personally transformed: Our churches’ future depends as much on us being personally transformed as it does on the congregations being transformed together.

Why this exercise? Why prayer? One of the hopes expressed for this collaboration process is to deepen the congregations’ spiritual grounding. These 4 weeks will encourage spiritual practices. The practice of turning to God in prayer for a few minutes/day trains our souls so we can return to God even when we are not in prayer. This helps us in many ways: During times of stress, we can return to God’s grounding presence; during daily life we begin to notice God’s beauty and wonder; with regard to our congregations, it can allow us to notice a future to which God calls us.

There are many forms of prayer: You are welcome to choose one or more form of prayer: (a) spoken prayer (bringing our gratitude, joys and concerns to God); (b) contemplative prayer (returning to God through meditative silence); (c) acceptance prayers (prayer phrases, offered through the day, to release thoughts and feelings into God’s care); (d) prayerful reading of Scripture / Lectio Divina (listening for how a text speaks into our lives); (e) walking prayer (praying while walking), etc.

How and when will our season of prayer occur? The season of prayer is intended to last four weeks, from May 7- June 4, 2023. It takes place in four ways:

- (a) Sunday worship will include some silence and a common prayer (the same in both congregations);
- (b) congregants are invited to spend several minutes per day praying for the congregations and/or several minutes per day in contemplative prayer;
- (c) a weekly resource will be provided to assist in reflection; and

(d) congregants are invited to engage in prayerful discernment conversations with one another.

How will we know what to do? How will we stay on track? Each week, a short reflection with questions will be sent out/made available (email, website) to prompt your discerning.

What if we don't get any insights? While great insights and holy moments may come during prayer, more likely they will come when you least expect it. They may come as a "still, small voice" or realization that floats into your consciousness in quiet moments, while in the line at the grocery store, when cooking dinner, during a walk in the park, etc. Spending time in prayer readies the heart to receive insights when not in prayer.

GUIDE FOR CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER*

Beginning

- Sit comfortably.
- If you wish, ease into prayer by reading Scripture, singing a hymn, or speaking to God
- Decide how long you wish to be in silence.
 - If you are new to this form of prayer, begin with 2-5 minutes, working your way gradually up to 10, 15 or 20 minutes. Set a timer so you do not need to worry about the time.
- State your intention (to be fully present to God).
- Take time to focus on your breath as this stills both body and mind. Breathe slowly, even briefly holding the empty-breath space when you have fully breathed out.

Silence

- Enter silence
- Use a short prayer to follow your breath or, when your mind wanders, use a word or very short prayer to return to God. Examples include, "God have mercy" or "Trust"
- Your mind will wander! Be gracious with yourself – do not judge yourself. Even those most seasoned in this form of prayer experience the wandering mind. In fact, a wandering mind is a gift – it gives you multiple opportunities to practice returning to God. Think of a wandering mind as a giving your prayer muscles a good work-out.
- Your mind will bring up all manner of things, from grocery lists to old wounds to great insights. Accept and release all of these. If it is of value, it will still be there for you when you leave your time of silence. The goal is to practice returning to God.

Closing

- Thank God for being with you during this time of silence.
- Breathe deeply and close your time of silence.

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