



Four Weeks of Discerning: guiding reflections

Introduction to 4 weeks of discerning

We are taking 4 weeks to together and intentionally open our hearts, minds and spirits – to allow God’s Spirit to guide us. We ask: How might God’s Spirit be leading St Paul’s and Wilmot United Churches at this time? The journey of discovery depends as much on us being personally transformed as it does on the congregations being transformed together.

This guide is a companion to 4 questions that arose in the process thus far. The questions are available as a separate document, or at the close of this guide. These reflections pair a text, a theme and one of the 4 questions each week, but that pairing is discretionary. Feel free to reflect on any of the 4 questions at any time in these 4 weeks, in relation to any theme or text.

Week 1 (May 8-14, 2023)

Text: Psalm 46:10; Mark 6: 31-32

Theme: Stillness and Silence

Question: Drawn by love (Spirituality)

“Because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, [Jesus] said to [his disciples], ‘Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.’ So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.”

(Mark 6:31-32)

St Paul’s and Wilmot have expressed an attraction to the possibility of being drawn into the future by love, rather than trying to “secure” the future out of fear. The possibility of being “drawn 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. We are searching for a spirituality that grounds us.

That spirituality begins with silence: “Be still and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10).

In this time when we have so much access to media and a phone in our pocket can “talk” to us 24/7 many of us have become completely uncomfortable with silence and solitude. Yet silence and solitude are foundational for a deepened spirituality. Solitude is about being intentionally alone with oneself in order to come nearer to both ourselves and to God. Jesus frequently spent time in solitude and silence: before beginning his ministry (Mark 1:12) or making decisions (Luke 6:12-16) while grieving (Matthew 14:13),





while anxious (Mark 14:32) and as he handled life's ongoing demands (Luke 5:15-16). Similarly, we are in a time that requires the wisdom rooted deep in our spirits. In the midst of life's demands, we return again and again to God's grounding presence through prayer.

This week try to spend anywhere from 2 to 20 minutes per day in intentional, contemplative prayer:

- Sit comfortably
- Decide how long you wish to be in silence—2 min, 5 min, working your way up gradually to 10, 15 or 20 minutes—you may wish to set a timer.
- State your intention (to be fully present to God); ask for God's help.
- Breathe in. Breathe out. Focus on your breathing while you enter a time of silence.
- Your mind will wander! Be gracious and do not judge yourself! A wandering mind is a gift—it gives you multiple opportunities to practice returning to God.
- When your mind wanders, focus on your breath, or use a word or very short prayer to return to God. "God, I give this time to you" or "Trust" or "Peace."
- 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.
- At the end of your time of prayer, give thanks to God for being with you. Breathe deeply and close your time of silence.
- Note: For a helpful prayer app, please see the following:
<https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/centering-prayer-mobile-app>

Outside of this time of prayer, when you talk in a small group or are reflecting on your own, consider the following questions:

1. *What is your experience of solitude and silence? What happens to your mind & body when you take time in silence? How do you experience God's presence during the practice of silence and solitude?*
2. *How do we nurture a relationship with God that helps us know what it means to shape the world?*
3. *What does all of this mean practically for our congregation? 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. What kinds of things that we do now strengthen our awareness of God's creative presence and strengthen our trust in God's loving purpose? What further (specific) steps could we take that deepen our relationship with God and give us courage to trust in God's leading?*





FOUR QUESTIONS FOR DISCERNING

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?*