WHAT'S UP GOD? PURSUING GOD'S WILL TOGETHER



Discernment Guide

Martin Macaulay

What's Up God? Pursuing God's Will Together

Introduction to this Discernment Guide

There is nothing more exciting, fulfilling and life-changing than hearing from God and having the courage to respond.

What is God calling me to do (and to be)? Where is God leading us? How do I discern whether an idea is God's leading or just my idea?

These are common questions for individuals, teams and churches as a whole. We want to get beyond listing the pros and cons of an idea and actually discern what



God is saying. Debating a topic and then voting can reach a decision, as can consensus and compromise, or following a strong leader who says "God told me we should...", but how much better to discern God's will together.

"Consensus and discernment of God's guidance are not the same thing. Consensus plays a significant role in the discernment process, but consensus can enable a group to decide among several options that are all undesirable and do not reflect God's priorities." (Lynne Baab, *The Power of Listening*, p.69)

These three weeks will explore:

- 1. **Individual discernment**: How we can hear from God ourselves.
- 2. **Discerning Together**: How we can hear from God together.
- 3. **Feedback on discernment**: What has God been saying? Seeking God about specific themes.

As you go into this time of discernment can I encourage you about several things?

- Expect to draw closer to God and to hear from God. The most important thing during this time is growing in our relationship with God.
- Experiment with different spiritual practices or disciplines in this guide – especially ones you haven't used often. I have included a summary of spiritual practices at the end of this booklet.
- Please share what you sense God saying. We want to hear from as many people as possible so we can discern common themes and words. We have left spaces for you to write down what you discern. There is a tear off feedback sheet at the back, or you can email feedback to office@etchurch.co.nz

- The programme for these three weeks lists a number of prayer meetings and other opportunities to meet with others to grow in discerning together.
- I expect you will have some specific questions you want to discern
 God's will about for yourself, and we are facing some specific steps as a
 church where we need God's leading, but before you narrow the focus
 to these questions I encourage you to pray about bigger questions for
 yourself (and for our church):
 - Is my (our) vision big enough? What dream does God have for me?
 - What is God doing in our region?
 - ♦ What do I (we) truly value?
 - ♦ What am I (are we) prepared to risk?
 - ♦ What will I (we) let go of?
 - What is the vision God has given me (us) for multiplying the variety of resources God has given me (us as a church)?



Relax! This isn't about having to carefully follow every step of a discernment process and being worried that God won't speak to us if we get something wrong. The heart preparation is more important than the discernment process. God will come into any extra space we can make for him and meet with us.

God bless you as you seek and listen, Martin Macaulay

"Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me."

Rev 3:20

Words spoken to Christians who had become lukewarm in their faith, but who thought they were rich and didn't need anything.



WEEK ONE – INDIVIDUAL DISCERNMENT HOW CAN WE HEAR FROM GOD OURSELVES?

Prepare: Read **Psalm 27** aloud (from your own Bible or the paraphrase version below) – allowing it to encourage you to seek God with all your heart.

Light, space, zest that's Gop!

So, with him on my side I'm fearless, afraid of no one and nothing.

When vandal hordes ride down ready to eat me alive, Those bullies and toughs

fall flat on their faces.

3 When besieged,
I'm calm as a baby.

When all hell breaks loose, I'm collected and cool.

4 I'm asking GoD for one thing, only one thing:

To live with him in his house my whole life long.

I'll contemplate his beauty; I'll study at his feet.

⁵ That's the only quiet, secure place in a noisy world,

The perfect getaway, far from the buzz of traffic.

⁶ God holds me head and shoulders above all who try to pull me down.

I'm headed for his place to offer anthems that will raise the roof!

Already I'm singing God-songs; I'm making music to GoD.

⁷⁻⁹ Listen, GoD, I'm calling at the top of my lungs:

"Be good to me! Answer me!"
When my heart whispered, "Seek God,"
my whole being replied,
"I'm seeking him!"

Don't hide from me now!

⁹⁻¹⁰ You've always been right there for me; don't turn your back on me now.

Don't throw me out, don't abandon me; you've always kept the door open.

My father and mother walked out and left me, but God took me in.

11-12 Point me down your highway, GoD; direct me along a well-lighted street; show my enemies whose side you're on.

Don't throw me to the dogs, those liars who are out to get me, filling the air with their threats.

13-14 I'm sure now I'll see God's goodness in the exuberant earth.

Stay with Goo!

Take heart. Don't quit.
I'll say it again: Stay with God.

<u>Drawing Close to God</u>: This is the most important thing. Don't let anything bring a barrier between you and God. Simply confess any sin and receive the forgiveness and cleansing God so freely offers in Christ.

(1 Jn 1:5-9) ⁵...God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. ⁷But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. ⁸If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

In The Bible: Jesus' example in Mark 1:32-39

What spiritual disciplines did Jesus practise here?

Is there anything I need to set aside so I can be open to what God wants?

After a busy and successful day, what might Jesus have been tempted to do? Instead what did he do?

Some Steps In Discerning God's Will Individually:

- 1. We have all kinds of dreams, motives and agendas, but what does God want? An important part of discerning God's will is to be able to pray what Ruth Haley Barton calls "the prayer for indifference" where we ask God to help us to be indifferent to everything except the will of God. "Not my will but Yours be done."
- 2. Spend time with God in solitude/silence/prayer/fasting...
- 3. Pay attention to the promptings of the Holy Spirit
- 4. Read God's revelation in the Bible. Does it confirm what you are sensing? God doesn't contradict himself.
- 5. Consider the circumstances of life. Do circumstances (the things that "happen") confirm what God is doing?
- 6. Write in your journal and reflect on what you sense God saying. Does it make sense?
- 7. Seek the wise counsel of others. Explain how God is leading you.

Go through the discernment questions and write down what you sense God saying:

•	Is my vision big enough? What dream does God have for me?
•	What is God doing in our region?
•	What do I truly value?
•	What am I prepared to risk?
•	What will I let go of?
•	What is the vision God has given me for putting to good use the variety of resources He has given me for His mission?

Week 2: Discernment - How Can We Hear From God Together?

Have you ever noticed how you are able to enjoy a private conversation with people one to one, sharing openly, listening attentively, but then when you gather in a group setting with the same people the dynamics change?

Manoeuvring and posturing appear because people don't trust each other enough and they become defensive. It could be that your team or organisation has developed an unhealthy culture which works against God's transforming work and prevents the team discerning God's will together.



How would it change your team dynamics if everyone agreed to be more concerned with the spiritual transformation of everyone in the team, than with getting others to agree with them? A transforming community is much more likely to discern God's will together than one where everyone pushes their own ideas and agendas.

"The best thing a person can bring to leadership is his or her own transforming self."

Ruth Hayley Barton, Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012) p.115

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)

The **first step** is agreeing to become a transforming community. People actually change and grow

The **second step** is agreeing on values.

Values describe what is truly important and the way the team or group will behave toward each other.

<u>In The Bible</u>: Studying Colossians 3:1-17 together will raise discussion about values. Read it now.

Is there some personal agenda Christ is calling you to die to?

Who do you need to "bear with and forgive whatever grievances you have against them?"

What do you need to be thankful about?

What behaviours from Col 3 are most important for your team right now?

What are most important for our church right now?

Some Steps in Discerning God's Will Together:

- 1. Gathering in **prayer** and acts of **worship** that help everyone surrender to God and the leading of His Holy Spirit.
- 2. **Hearing Scripture** not just to learn something, but to recommit to following God's ways which are not our ways. (Isa 55:8)
- 3. **Prayer for Indifference**. Ask God to help us to be indifferent to everything except the will of God, so we can pray, "Not my will but Yours be done." The fact that Jesus prayed this prayer in the garden of Gethsemene before going to the cross shows that there is nothing wrong with having preferences, opinions or strong desires. But there could be and often is a difference between our preference and desire and the will of God.

4. Listen to Others

- Hear what God has been doing up till now. Usually, we aren't starting from a blank piece of paper. If a group has done work already – hear what they have done and where God has led them.
- Listen to other people without interrupting.
- Speak for yourself without broad generalisations such as "people are saying..."
- Do not challenge what others say. Rather, ask good questions that enable you to wonder about things together.
- Listen to the guiet person and the minority voice.

- 5. **Listen in Silence**: Often it is when we pause the discussion and reflect in silence that God's way forward becomes clear.
- Reconvene and listen again.
- 7. **Select an option** (or options) consistent with what God is doing, which the group can explore further (either at this meeting or next time) seeking confirmation.

Go through the discernment questions and write down what you sense God saying:

Is our vision big enough? What dream does God have for us?

What is God doing in our region?

What do we truly value?

What are we prepared to risk?

What will we let go of? (Helps with the prayer of indifference)

What is the vision God has given us for multiplying the variety of resources God has given our church for his mission?

Week 3: Specific Issues for Discernment

So far we have been asking the big underlying discernment questions. But we also need to discern God's will on **more specific issues**. This doesn't mean we should go into a lengthy discernment process over what we should cook for dinner today, or which new computer to buy for the church. God has left us many acceptable options to choose from. We can quite quickly gather the facts: what we need; what is available; what we can afford... and decide.

But there are **key issues** where we need God's leading. And even simpler issues (such as what to have for dinner) can have deeper questions behind them which need wise discernment. For example: what effect are our dinner choices having on our health? How much energy has been used to make the food and transport it to us? How much packaging does the food have and is it recyclable? Is there anyone coming to dinner for whom particular food is not culturally acceptable?

You can see that often there is a question beneath the question. For example, a question about whether you should change jobs might deepen into questions like: What are your talents and spiritual gifts? What you are passionate about? What is making you unhappy in your current job? How much of that unhappiness could follow you to your new job because it is something you bring to the workplace? How is God calling you to mature and be transformed?

Personal Discernment:

- What is one specific question you need to seek God about?
- Is there a larger question (or questions) beneath this one?

Use the steps from week 1 to seek God's will about that question, keeping in mind what you wrote about the larger discernment questions in week 1.

Gather the Information you need:

This is especially important when you are discerning God's will as a group. Discernment doesn't ignore data, but try to gather the data without judging. Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, p.208 gives the following excellent advice:

- **Gather facts**, background reports, financial information, advice from experts, etc.
- Listen to others in your group or community: those who will be affected by the decision; those long term members who have spiritual maturity and experience...

- **Direction and Calling**: what best fits your (or the church's) call from God?
- **Scripture**: Is God bringing to mind Scripture or scriptural themes that have a direct bearing on the issue?
- The Life of Christ: Is there anything in the life and teachings of Jesus that speaks to your considerations?
- The Fruit of the Spirit: Which choice will nurture the fruit of the Spirit and foster life transformation?
- Closer to God or Further from God: Which choice seems to draw us closer to God and the life, peace, freedom and wholeness He brings? Which draws us away from God and brings distress and confusion?
- **Faith Tradition**: Is there any guiding principle or wisdom from our heritage that could guide us?
- **Love and Unity**: Which choice would foster the greatest love and unity among us, wider Christians, and those we serve?

Discernment Together:

If you are doing these studies with your life group you might want to **choose a discernment issue** for your group such as:

What is God calling our group to be like in the future?

Use the steps from week 2 to seek God's will about that question, keeping in mind what you wrote about the larger discernment questions in week 2.

Spend time to gather the information you need (as above).

Our church needs God's guidance on a number of issues, always keeping in mind those bigger discernment questions of week 2.

Some other specific discernment areas are:

- 1. What is God doing on the coast and how might we join in His mission there?
- 2. What facilities do we need for God's mission and where should they be located?
- 3. What is God's vision for multiplying the variety of resources God has given our church for His mission?
- 4. Where is God leading us in our worship services?

If you would like to read more about hearing from God, I recommend:

Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012)

Lynne M. Baab, *The Power of Listening: Building Skills for Mission and Ministry* (London: Roman & Littlefield, 2014). Lynne's book has a chapter on consensus and discernment in congregations and leadership groups as well as two chapters on listening to God (through Scripture and through spiritual practices).

Bill Hybels, *The Power of a Whisper: Hearing God. Having the Guts to Respond* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010)

Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Building an Intimate Relationship with the Creator* (London: Harper Collins, 1999)

Joyce Huggett, Listening to God (Hodder & Stoughton, 1986)

YOUR FEEDBACK

We would love to hear what you have sensed God saying through this time. Please email to office@etchurch.co.nz or use this tear off page and leave it at church.



Name:

Personal Discernment: (anything you want to share about what you discerned God saying for you personally)

Discernment together: (anything you want to share about what you discerned God saying for your group or the church).

- 1. Is our vision big enough? What dream does God have for us?
- 2. What is God doing in our region?
- 3. What do we truly value?
- 4. What are we prepared to risk?
- 5. What will we let go of? (Helps with the prayer of indifference)

Or on any of the specific issues:		
	1.	What is God doing on the coast and how might we join in His mission there?
	2.	What facilities do we need for God's mission and where should they be located?
	3.	What is the vision God has given us for multiplying the variety of resources God has given our church for His mission?
	4.	Where is God leading us in our worship services?
Many Thanks,		
Martin.		

Summary of Spiritual Practices

These practices are things we can choose to do, that help put us in a place where God can draw us closer to Him, transform our hearts, and we can discern his will for us. For example, we can choose to spend a few hours in silence, which will help us with that difficult task of controlling our tongue, and help us listen for what God wants to tell us.



There are three key, interrelated ways in which Christians grow spiritually and true life transformation occurs:

- The Work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.
- The Ordinary Events of Life which God uses to shape us.
- Planned Spiritual Exercises or Disciplines.

We need God's grace and power in order to change, and yet God does expect us to make a committed effort too.

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." (Col 3:12)

The **spiritual exercises are training exercises** helping us to build up spiritual muscle and be more like the people God has called us to be.

"Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come." (1 Tim 4:7-8)

Experiment with different exercises to see how they can help you.



Prayer – as a Spiritual Practice

Prayer is probably one of the best known spiritual exercises, and yet many Christians do not pray very much. One helpful definition of prayer is:

"Talking to God
about what we are now doing together."

- Prayer is action probably the most important action you can take for the day.
- Don't get all worried about how much more you feel you should be praying. Thank God for prompting you to think about prayer more and simply pray. "Pray as you can, not as you can't."
- Focus on exactly what you want to happen. Be specific.
- Enlist others in the prayer cause on a regular basis.
- Stick with it. Don't quit. (Lk 18:1-8)
- Try both spontaneous and written prayers.
- Consider what you do with your body when you pray as prayer involves our whole being. As you are able, try kneeling, lying prostrate before God, raising your hands in prayer...
- We need other spiritual disciplines (such as solitude and silence) in place if we are to pray effectively.

Some Benefits of Prayer:

- A Removes the habit of self-reliance and the despair that comes from the mind of the flesh (Rom 8:6-7).
- Puts us in touch with the 'real world'.
- \diamond We engage the impossible in dependence on God.
- Observe to Builds our faith as we see answers to prayer.
- ♦ Trains us to reign with Christ eternally

Solitude – as a Spiritual Practice

Solitude is choosing to step free from human relationships for a period of time, in isolation or anonymity, to make room for occupation of our lives by God.

Some Hints:

- Try setting aside 3 or 4 hours at first in a pleasant place (even if you live alone, plan specific times of solitude).
- Just observe. Don't do anything. Notice your surroundings especially if you are outside enjoying God's creation.
- Try walking along the beach.
- You might pray, but don't make a job of it. Simply talk to your Heavenly Father.
- If you are at home and you fall asleep, don't worry. Enjoy the rest and talk to God when you wake up. (1 Kings 19:4-9)
- Solitude is not a private therapeutic place. Rather, it is the place of conversion, the place where the old self dies and the new self is born.

Some Benefits of Solitude:

- ♦ It breaks our co-dependency. Others can live without us and us without them.
- We learn to appreciate other people more, without needing to control them.
- It frees us from busyness and overwork (and other things that bind us)
- ♦ It builds trust in God as we take our hands off and allow God to take charge.

Silence – as a Spiritual Practice

Noise is inherently exhausting. It agitates us. Silence is associated with being able to rest, listen and trust God.

Two kinds of silence

A) To be in a quiet place:

- Try to get away from all unnatural, artificial sounds (traffic, electronic beeping, telephone...)
- If you have a quiet room in your house, go there and spend half an hour in silence. Don't worry if you fall asleep.
- You may be able to walk by the river in the quiet, or visit one of our lovely beaches.
- Your communication with God will be richer. Your prayers will be centred on God.
- Families will need to negotiate these times so each family member has opportunity for times of silence.

B) To refrain from speaking:

- Talk can be necessary, but it can also be controlling, manipulative and even brutal.
- Arrange to have an hour or more when you will not talk. This can even be achieved in families by negotiation.
- Don't be legalistic about it. You may have to say something.
- You will begin to come to a place where you are at peace and your tongue is not running out of control
- How did you feel while not talking? Were there any arguments during the time?



Bible Reading

as a Spiritual Practice

God has revealed himself to us in specific ways in the Bible.



That is how we discover God's nature, his plan of salvation in Christ, and what God calls us to do in response...

A) Devotional Reading:

- Find a quiet space. Ask God to speak to you. Read a small piece of the Bible. You might have a devotional guide such as the Word for Today, or one of Scripture Union's excellent guides such as Daily Bread or Encounter with God.
- Apply what you have read to your life.
- Don't worry if you don't understand it all, or remember it all. Allow God to feed you from his word sufficiently for the day.

B) Meditative Reading: (such as Lectio Divina)

- Again prepare by finding a quiet space and asking God to speak to you.
 Choose a short passage of the Bible and read it four times slowly asking a slightly different question each time:
 - ♦ First **read**, listening for a word or phrase that strikes you or catches your attention. Savour that word.
 - ♦ Then reflect asking, "How is my life touched by this word?" What is it in my life that needs to hear this right now?
 - ♦ **Respond**: What is my response to God based on what I have read and encountered? Be honest with God about how you feel about it.
 - ♦ Finally, **rest** in God and surrender your ways to God's ways. Resolve to live out that word in your life through the day.

C) Study:

- From time to time take a longer time to study a passage or book of the Bible or a word or theme.
- Read a variety of translations. Identify everyone and every place mentioned. Write down the verbs or action words and what is happening. Look for repetition. Look for the important connecting words (therefore, but, because...). Look for contrasts, comparisons and illustrations.
- Use a **Bible dictionary** or commentary to help you learn about the settings and customs of the Bible times and cultures.
- Read what Christians from different viewpoints and time periods have said and believed about those verses.

Worship – as a Spiritual Practice

Gathering with other Christians to worship God can be life-changing.

Some Hints:

- Pre-prayer to prepare. Pray before you come to worship that God will open your heart to hear from God and respond in praise...
- Come expecting God to do something through the different parts of the service: inspiring you through a praise song, moving you through a prayer, challenging or reassuring you through a sermon or a prophecy or a scripture, healing you through a prayer...
- Come prepared to contribute with your spiritual gifts by encouraging those you meet, or offering a prayer, or a scripture, or a prophecy at an appropriate time.
- Use your whole body to worship: heart, mind, hands, arms, legs.
- Give thanks for the different age groups present.
- Find someone you don't know well and ask them how their past week has gone. **Encourage** them if you can.
- Tell others what God has been doing in your life.

Some benefits of worshipping with others:

- ♦ We benefit from the **different gifts** of different people.
- ♦ **Artistic** gifts from music to flowers, dance, drama and painting can all point us to God in worship.
- ♦ **We can hear** what God is doing in people's lives.
- When we are feeling down, others will be up, and when we are up, others will be down.
- We can bless and celebrate each other in words, through passing communion, through baptism...
- We can enjoy experiences and emotions: joy, laughter, celebration, tears, ... and help each other discover what the Spirit is doing and saying through these experiences and emotions.
- ♦ We can be prompted to give God thanks and praise.





Journalling

- as a Spiritual Practice

A Journal is simply a notebook where you can record your conversations with God and reflect on your spiritual journey.

Some Hints:

- Write down what you pray about; what you sense God saying to you as you read your Bible and listen to God.
- Look back in your journal over time to discover what was indeed God speaking to you and what were your own thoughts – this becomes more obvious as time goes by.
- Use the journal as a place for **reflecting** on your spiritual life and on things that happen to you.
 - Describe a particular event (not too big like 'my marriage is failing' but a smaller part of it like 'last night we squabbled over how to discipline the kids')
 - ♦ Who said what? How was I feeling?
 - Think more broadly:
 - What assumptions and expectations were there?
 - ♦ Any bias or prejudice?
 - ♦ Look to the past?
 - Has this happened before? Traditions?
 - ◊ Identify what is bad and what is good?
 - \diamond Where is God in all this? How does God want me to change?

Some Benefits of keeping a Journal:

- It encourages us by revealing where God is at work.
- It gives us greater insight into our behaviour and where we need to grow spiritually.
- It helps us be more honest with ourselves and with God.
- It fosters prayer and patience & compassion for others.

Fasting – as a Spiritual Practice

Fasting is going without food (or some other thing) for a limited time for the spiritual purpose of focusing on God and glorifying Him.



Fasting is not a hunger strike, nor trying to get God to do what we want; nor an attempt to earn our way into heaven, nor a way of appearing to be deeply spiritual.

Some Hints:

- Fasting usually helps our physical health, but check with your doctor if you are uncertain (e.g. diabetics, expectant mothers should probably not fast.)
- Fasting and Prayer go together.
- Begin gently. Try missing one meal. Then fast from after dinner until the next dinner, missing breakfast and lunch, drinking fruit juice. Then try drinking only water.
- Your stomach will initially complain especially at meal time. Try sipping a drink at those times (not too cold).
- Then consider longer periods. Headaches from caffeine withdrawal and feelings of weakness or dizziness will pass.

Some Benefits of Fasting:

- ♦ It puts the non-essential things in perspective. "We do not live by bread alone..."
- ♦ We affirm and experience another world. Fasting is feasting.
- \diamond We humbly learn to trust God to sustain us.
- ♦ It develops self-control over our body. Our bodily passions need not rule over us.
- ♦ It often reveals the things that control us (anger, pride...), and begins to deal with them.

Programme for WHAT'S UP GOD? PURSUING GOD'S WILL TOGETHER

SUN 25 FEB	All services: INDIVIDUAL DISCERNMENT - Hearing from God ourselves
Tues 27	Chapel 9.45 am Oak Lounge, East Taieri Church — Practising individual discernment
Thurs 29	Prayer Breakfast 7-8 am Fellowship Centre, East Taieri Church
SUN 4 MAR	All services: FEEDBACK ON INDIVIDUAL DISCERNMENT – What has God been saying? Teaching on discerning together
Tues 6	Chapel 9.45am Oak Lounge, East Taieri Church — Practising Discerning Together
Thurs 8	Prayer Breakfast, 7-8 am Fellowship Centre, East Taieri Church
Thurs 8	DISCERNING TOGETHER, 7pm - the Hub with coffee and dessert.
SUN 11 MAR	All services: FEEDBACK ON DISCERNMENT TOGETHER – What has God been Saying? Discerning some specific questions.
Tues 13	Chapel 9.45am Oak Lounge, East Taieri Church — Praying over feedback – seeking common themes
Thurs 15	Prayer Breakfast, 7-8am Fellowship Centre, East Taieri Church
Thurs 15	Powerstation – 7pm Ocean View Church - Discernment regarding Fresh Expression – Community on the Coast – and prayer walk.

Mission Facilities Group — 7 pm Oak Lounge, East Taieri Church

Discernment time on the facilities needed for God's mission here



Tues 20