

# Discernment Course



## What is the Discernment course?

The Discernment course exists to help leaders listen together to God's invitation when making decisions.

We live in times of tremendous change in the Church. Those in leadership are faced with many challenging circumstances, as well as many potential ways forward. The choices that church communities struggle with are generally not between good and bad options, but often between two or more good things from which we seek to discern the particular choice that God calls us to.

God desires us to be free and flourishing, not weary and overburdened. God's invitation, then, is not to try and do everything, but to choose to focus on the particular ways and places that God calls us to in our unique contexts. The Discernment Course seeks to help leaders listen carefully to what God is doing in their local context, to develop tools to support decision-making and to learn how to make good and prayerful decisions together.

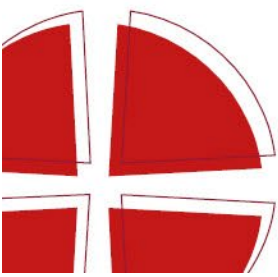
The course is made up of four 90-minute sessions:

1. Laying foundations for discernment and decision making
2. Discernment
3. Decision making
4. Making decisions together.

## Who is the course for?

The course is intended for anyone involved in leadership in the local church, including church stewards, circuit stewards, local preachers, lay workers, deacons, presbyters and superintendents.

Although not essential, it is helpful for those who make decisions together, such as circuit leadership teams, to journey through the course together, as this allows the



group to talk through examples from their own context.

This also helps establish a shared approach to discernment which can be built upon over the months and years ahead.



## How can the course be used?

The full course can be delivered in six hours, in person or online.

Session 1 needs to be completed at least a week before the next three sessions, as it seeks to establish the foundations for prayer that the remaining sessions are built upon. Sessions 2, 3 and 4 can be offered in a single day, or over three evenings.

It may be that elements of the course are helpful in a range of contexts. Feel free to use the material contained within the course in whatever way is helpful. However, please do keep the focus on prayer, as the course only makes sense when based within the lived experience of God.

The course can be delivered by local leaders, perhaps by a local presbyter, deacon or circuit steward. Alternatively, you may want to speak with your aligned Learning and Development Officer from the Learning Network if you would like to reflect on how to use this resource in your local context.

## Using the material

All the session plans are given below. Full guidance is given for running the course including facilitators' notes (given in italics), timings and lists of resources needed.

To run the course in person, you will need:

Flip chart and pens

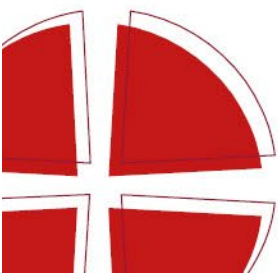
Bible

*Optional: speakers*

To run the course online, you will need access to:

PowerPoint or Word, for shared working

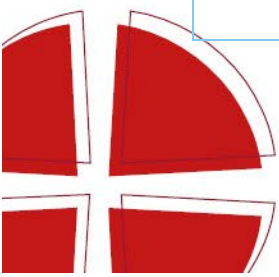
Zoom whiteboard or Mentimeter





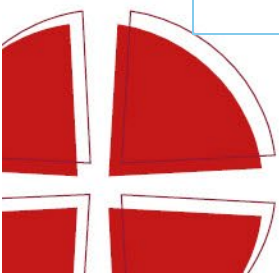
## Session 1: Laying Foundations for Discernment and Decision Making

Timings		Resources
5 mins	<p><b>Welcome and introduction</b></p> <p>In this session we will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Talk about who we believe God to be – as individuals or as a congregation.</li><li>• Explore how our answer may not be obvious, or shared.</li><li>• Recognise that people who believe in the same God may prioritise different aspects or characteristics or faces of that God.</li></ul>	
5 mins	<p><b>Working together agreement</b></p> <p><i>When working in-person, write the working together agreement on flipchart paper and display where everyone can see it during all four sessions of the course.</i></p> <p>When we work together in groups it is important to have a shared way of working. This agreement is proposed as our way of working together on this course, but also for you to take forward when working with other groups. As a group, we agree to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Respect difference (views/feelings)</li><li>• Listen well</li><li>• Challenge constructively</li></ul>	Flipchart or PowerPoint slide if working online.



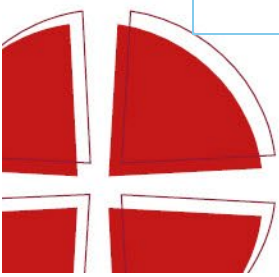


	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor our own air space (<i>if you tend to speak a lot, be aware of giving others a chance to speak, if you tend to speak less, try to contribute more so that others can benefit from your wisdom</i>)</li> <li>• Respect boundaries of confidentiality</li> <li>• Wave/raise a hand rather than interrupt</li> <li>• Move around if we need to</li> </ul> <p>Is there anything else to add?</p>	
<b>10 mins</b>	<p><b>Praying with words</b></p> <p><i>This exercise can be done individually, or in small groups using a sheet of flipchart paper – rotate the paper for each question so that the responses are shared in the group.</i></p> <p>Working outward in concentric circles...</p> <p>Write the word 'God' in the centre of the page.</p> <p>Take a moment to look at it, and to notice your responses.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Around this, write some of your names for God. What do you call God – when addressing God directly, or when you talk to others about God, your private names for God and your public names?</li> <li>• What are some words for what God is like?</li> <li>• What are some words for what God does – how does God act?</li> <li>• How do you experience God – on your own, in nature, in Church?</li> </ul>	Pens and sheet of flipchart paper.



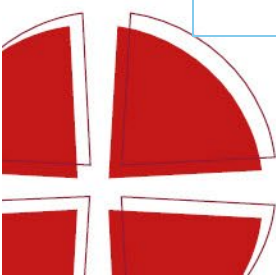


	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• [In Church groups] How do we experience God in this place?</li><li>• What is your response to this God?</li></ul> <p>Take some time to notice what you have written.</p>	
<b>5 mins</b>	<p><b>Discernment vs decision making</b></p> <p>Why do we not just jump into the action of deciding the question and discussing options?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Because Christian discernment (as opposed to facilitated decision making) begins with an understanding of who God is and a willingness to talk about God.</li><li>• As Ruth Barton writes in <i>Pursuing God's Will Together</i> (2012, IVP Books: Illinois), "our approach to decision making should be different from secular models." While those secular models, decision making processes and facilitation techniques are all good – and we use them in our discernment process – they are structures, not foundations.</li><li>• Our foundations are our understanding of who God is, how God acts, and how we hear God's voice. It's easy to think that when we say God, we all share the same understanding of who we're talking about, but understandings of</li></ul>	



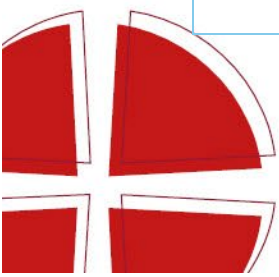


	who God is vary significantly between individuals and congregations.	
5 mins	<p><b>Some basic principles</b></p> <p>There are some things that must be taken as read when we discern:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• God is real</li><li>• God is lovingly and creatively active in the world and cares about our specific time and place. God cares about what we are doing [in a rural chapel at 7 on a rainy Thursday evening when the heating has inexplicably stopped working] (<i>change the example according to your group context</i>).</li><li>• God wants to be in communication with us and can be heard and experienced by those who pay attention (though sometimes that is easier than others, and it may take a very different form for different people).</li></ul> <p>Although these may seem self-evident, for a moment ask yourself if this is really what you believe yourself – and if it's what you think most of the people in your church believe most of the time.</p> <p><i>Pause to allow for individual reflection.</i></p>	



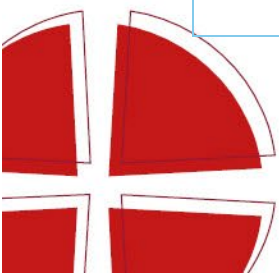


	<p>Good discernment grows out of these beliefs. Reminding people at the beginning of a meeting that these things are true changes how the meeting goes.</p>	
<b>5 mins</b>	<p><b>Understandings of God: How we respond</b></p> <p>Who we understand God to be will shape who we understand ourselves to be which, in turn, influences how we act in the world. These understandings may be true, or may be untrue (or nuanced) and therefore not helping us when we make choices.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>God is busy</b> – I must be busy too therefore I must be constantly busy and active OR if I can't be busy (through illness or exhaustion) I feel like a failure.</li><li>• <b>God is a loving parent</b> – I am a beloved therefore I feel secure OR I am not experiencing that love therefore I worry that I have done something wrong.</li><li>• <b>God is disappointed</b> – I am a disappointment therefore I am constantly trying to 'live up to expectations' or I give up.</li><li>• <b>God is delighted</b> – I am a delight therefore I try to live in a way that responds to God's delight OR I forget that God is also inviting me to join in with kingdom building.</li></ul>	





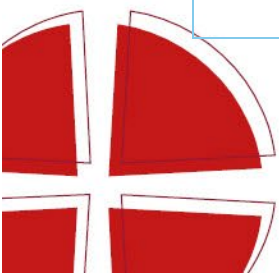
<b>10 mins</b>	<b>Small groups/Breakout rooms</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What understandings of God (or ideas about God) help with good decision making?</li><li>• How might an unhelpful understanding of God create bad decision making?</li></ul>	
<b>5 mins</b>	<b>Understandings of God in decision making</b> <p>Some common misleading understandings are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• God is interested and observing, but not directly involved.</li><li>• God will only love me if I make the right decision.</li><li>• God has set this as a test to see if I am up to standard.</li><li>• God has given me/us an instruction manual (the Bible) and expects us to figure it out on our own.</li><li>• God is waiting impatiently for us to make up our minds. God is in a hurry.</li><li>• God has the script, but is refusing to let me see it.</li></ul> <p>A more helpful understanding might be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• God is loving me, leading me, in the decision with me, helping me in the process.</li><li>• Learning to accept a helpful understanding of God will take time (and the negative one will sneak back when</li></ul>	





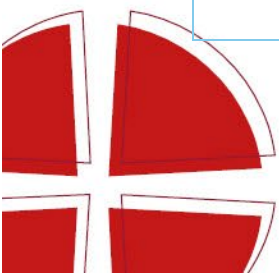


	individuals or churches are under stress) but being aware of what is happening and naming it helps.	
<b>10 mins</b>	<b>Small groups/Breakout rooms</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When your congregation/group is at its best, what is your shared understanding of who God is?</li><li>• How does that influence the group's understanding of itself?</li><li>• How does it influence how the group makes decisions?</li></ul>	
<b>5 mins</b>	<b>Understanding of self</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When we're approaching discernment, we need to be aware of who God is for us, and how God is with us.</li><li>• We also need to be aware of who God has made us to be – the person God has called us to be (and the community/congregation God calls us to be).</li><li>• We need to begin by knowing who we are, what drives us, what matters to us. If we are going to discern, by ourselves or with others, we need to know who we are.</li><li>• How many different types of knowing dwell inside you (are you practical, financial, good with running projects, community knowledge, household knowledge, theological knowledge)?</li></ul>	





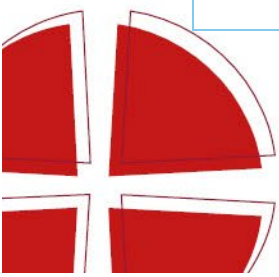
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What are the different facets of your wisdom? And which ones do you feel comfortable bringing to meetings, and which ones do you keep shelved away.</li><li>• How might your home/church/community be poorer if you withhold aspects of your wisdom or insight from the group?</li></ul>	
5 mins	<b>Personal reflection</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Who are you when you're at your very best?</li><li>• What is the version of yourself that you present when you're in this group?</li><li>• What parts of yourself do you silence when you're with this group?</li><li>• What aspects of who you are might God be inviting you to risk sharing with this group of people?</li></ul>	
5 mins	<b>A commitment as discernment begins with prayer</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We all have our identities that we choose to present to others – the person who brings property knowledge, or legal awareness, the expert on recruitment. But, in discernment, those aren't the primary or most important qualities you bring. You bring your relationship with God, your awareness of what God is doing, your ability to pray, and to pay attention. If, for</li></ul>	





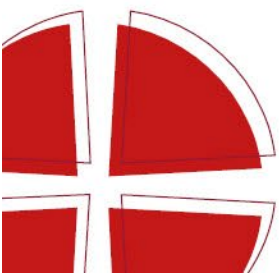
whatever reason, those things are not as strong as they might be, then have time to reconnect with God built into the process. This isn't as aside before the 'real work' starts. It's the establishment of a foundation on which other work will flourish or flounder.

- To discern well, those who discern need to be in touch with God. This means being praying individuals in the 'present tense' of the decision.
- Before any major decision, ask those involved to commit to prayer for five minutes a day for at least a week, but preferably a month. Little and often is easier to commit to. The group could all be asked to set a reminder on their phones so that everyone prays at the same time.
- Choose one method of prayer (ie Lectio/Breathing/Nature) with a focus on simply paying attention to how God is with you in the present. (*You may find helpful ideas to share here: [intergenerationalprayercards-smaller\\_gIdoAe.pptx](#)*)
- The focus of prayer here is **not** asking God for anything, or on the area of discernment. It is on deepening attentiveness to God.





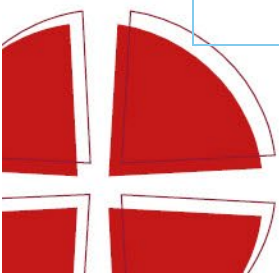
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>A discerning people <b>must</b> be a praying people.</li></ul>	
<b>10 mins</b>	<p><b>To discuss together</b></p> <p><i>Either discuss for 10 minutes with whole group, or small groups for 5 minutes followed by large group for 5 minutes.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>What commitment do the group make to each other in terms of prayer?</li><li>How will we be accountable to one another?</li><li>Can each person in turn make a verbal commitment to the group?</li></ul>	
<b>5 mins</b>	<p><b>Closing Prayer</b></p> <p>‘Oh God, you search me and you know me’ (Psalm 139:1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>What does God find?</li><li>What does God know?</li></ul> <p><i>Agree a time/date/location for the next meeting.</i></p>	
<b>Finish</b>		





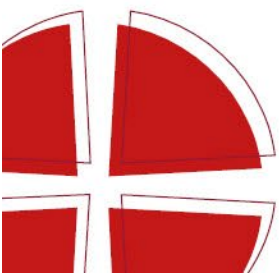
## Session 2: Discernment

Timings		Resources
5 mins	<p><b>Welcome and introduction</b></p> <p>In this session we will explore:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is discernment and why does it matter? The word is used broadly, but it means different things to different people.</li><li>• How do we know what is of God and what is not?</li><li>• How do we work out where God seems to attracting our attention and inviting us to join in?</li></ul>	
10 mins	<p><b>Opening prayer: the Examen</b></p> <p><i>If you do not want to lead the prayer yourself, use <a href="http://pray-as-you-go.org/player/prayer%20tools/2274">pray-as-you-go.org/player/prayer%20tools/2274</a></i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Begin by becoming aware that God is with you in this moment, gazing on you with great love. Ask God to guide your heart and mind as you pray (1 min).</li><li>• Allow the last 24 hours to unfold in your mind – without judging or worrying about anything in particular, just try to remember what happened (2 min).</li><li>• Cast your mind back again. Was there any moment where God seemed close, or where you experienced an increase in faith, hope or love – a moment that felt deeply or richly good and life giving. Try to widen your gaze – it may have been drinking coffee, or walking the dog. It does not necessarily involve prayer or church or</li></ul>	Speakers to play recording if used.



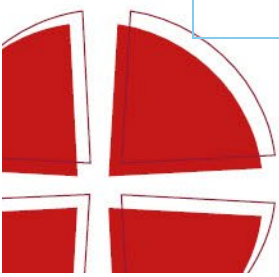


	<p>even a conscious awareness of God. When you find it, remember it, relish it and give thanks (3 min).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Again, look back for a moment where you felt far from God, or where you struggled or out of sorts – not who you want to be. Again remember it, and ask God's help (3 min).</li><li>• Look forward to today – what in particular do you need God's help with? Take a moment to ask for it (1 min).</li></ul>	
<b>7 mins</b>	<p><b>Small groups/Breakout rooms</b></p> <p>If you're discerning as a church there needs to be a shared conviction that God cares about how the decision is made, not just the final result. People need to be willing to take the risk of talking about God together, listening to others experience of God.</p> <p>In breakout rooms, for five minutes, share something of your experience of God in the last day. This does not have to be what you focused on in the prayer, but try to be honest. Listen to each other without interrupting or interpreting. Just listen.</p>	
<b>3 mins</b>	<p><b>Developing Discernment</b></p> <p>Today's session focuses on Ignatian discernment. It's based on the teaching of Ignatius of Loyola (from Spain). He is famous for his wisdom on discernment. This wisdom is found elsewhere, throughout Scripture, tradition and experience. Ignatius' genius is simply to gather this knowledge together into a set of 'rules' that are easily accessible.</p>	





	Discernment doesn't just mean 'making a decision in a Christian context'. It's a system, a method, to help us pay attention to God, to make sense of what we notice and respond according to what is revealed.	
7 mins	<p><b>Noticing your own experience</b></p> <p><i>After each question, share responses and gather on flipchart/online.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Remember a time when you felt very close to God. What did it feel like? (give 2 minutes quiet)</li><li>• Remember a time when you felt far away from God. What did it feel like? (give 2 minutes quiet)</li><li>• Which set of feelings felt easier to access?</li></ul> <p><i>Read each list back.</i></p> <p>What happens inside you as you hear each list?</p>	Two flipchart pages and pens (if meeting in person), or a method such as Zoom whiteboard if meeting online
10 mins	<p><b>That which is of God (consolation)</b></p> <p>Before we get into the 'rules' of Ignatius, it is helpful to note about Ignatius' use of "good spirit" and "bad spirit". This was common language in the 1500s. We might not now understand this as an external force, but as human impulses towards what is best for us, and that which is not. Or, that which draws us towards God and that which causes us to draw back from God; that which helps us grow, and that which gets in the way. Try not to worry too much about the language – it's a useful shorthand for the movements which we experience within ourselves. These 'rules' are quoted from Ignatius, but notice if they are similar to the</p>	





characteristics of God and 'not God' that we recorded earlier:

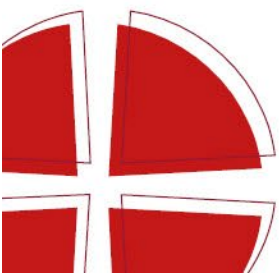
- “The characteristic of the good spirit is to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations and quiet, making things easy and removing all obstacles so that the person may move forward in doing good.”
- “It is characteristic of God and his angels in the movements prompted by them to give true gladness and spiritual joy, whilst banishing all the sadness and distress brought on by the enemy.”

The characteristic of the “good spirit” is not necessarily nice, easy or comfortable. Sometimes we may need to do something difficult or painful, but know it to be in the service of something that God desires.

Like water going into a sponge, it feels natural and right.

**What is not of God (Desolation):**

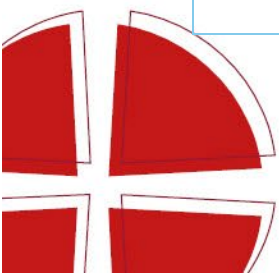
- “It is characteristic of the bad spirit to harass, sadden and obstruct, and to disturb with false reasoning, so as to impede progress.”
- “... the enemy whose characteristic it is to fight against this joy and spiritual consolation by bringing forward specious





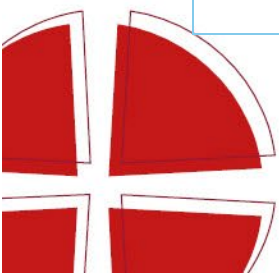


	<p>arguments, subtleties and one fallacy after another.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Like water splashing off a rock, it feels noisy and disturbing.</li></ul>	
5 mins	<p><b>Telling the difference</b></p> <p>According to Ignatius, we tell the difference between what is of God and what is not of God:</p> <p><b>By where they are leading</b> – that which is of God leads to love, tears, increase in faith, hope, charity, a quiet and peaceful soul. That which is not of God leads to a sense of darkness, loss of confidence, a loss of hope, feeling apathetic or lukewarm.</p> <p><b>By the orientation</b> – God leads upward and outward, towards a greater love of others and the world. Movement away from God is inward and downward, tending to be more selfish and self-obsessed.</p> <p><b>Because God ultimately benefits from what is happening</b> – for example, sometimes new Christians get caught up in a wave of enthusiasm and say yes to everything, but then find themselves exhausted and resentful of the Church and God.</p> <p><b>Because both the process and the outcome are good</b> – we cannot use an unjust process to achieve our aims. The end goal cannot justify an unjust process.</p>	





	<p><b>By the tone of voice that we sense internally</b> – if something feels or sounds like it's being spoken in a cruel, petty or disempowering tone of voice, it probably isn't God. We may experience this when we set out to do something new or challenging for God. A voice inside us says 'do you really think <i>you</i> are capable of doing this?' Many of us have an internal self-saboteur that does not speak to us in the way that God does.</p>	
20 mins	<p><b>Bible Study – the things that get in the way of seeing</b></p> <p><i>Give the group a printout of the Bible passage John chapter 9 (in-person) or have a link to the passage (online). Ask six people to read the passage, each reading a section.</i></p> <p><i>Divide the group into four small groups and allocate each group one of the paragraphs below to answer the discussion questions:</i></p> <p><i>John 9:8-12 – his neighbours</i>  <i>John 9: 18-23 – his parents</i>  <i>John 9:24-34 – the Pharisees</i>  <i>John 9: 30-38 – the healed man</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What was it that prevented these people from seeing clearly what God was doing?</li> <li>• How do we sometimes have the same problems with seeing clearly?</li> </ul> <p><i>Ask group to share a summary of their answers with the wider group.</i></p>	<p>A printout of the Bible passage (John 9) and questions (if meeting in person) or a link to the Bible passage (if meeting online).</p>





**8 mins**

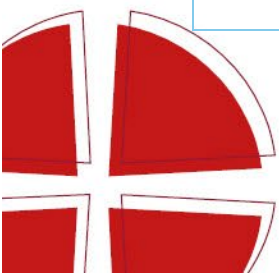
In the story an inability to see new things happening, a fear of being judged or rejected for speaking our truth, or an inability to see beyond learned wisdom or tradition all get in the way of seeing the truth.

We all have similar biases that get in the way of seeing or recognising God's presence and action.

We all have preferences – which might even seem good – but which we hold onto so tightly that we're not able to open our hands to what God is offering. They might take the form of:

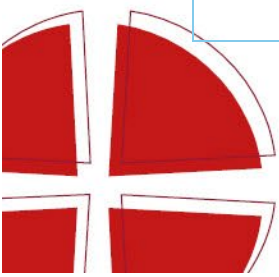
- The desire to look productive, innovative or dynamic.
- The desire to be noticed.
- The desire to be comfortable.
- The desire to work with certain people/groups or not work with certain people/groups.
- The desire for things to stay the same, or the desire for change for the sake of change.
- The desire to be envied or admired because of our possessions, power or standing with others.

No-one is entirely without these, and often we might not even be aware when we're clinging to old certainties or securities. We can't 'fix' this by ourselves. We can pay attention, notice, ask for God's help and make a conscious effort to be open to what might not fit with our preferences.



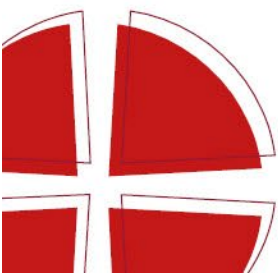


	Church communities, too, have these preferences – as anyone who has ever considered pew removal or changes to church mugs will know! Again, the invitation is to pay attention, notice and ask for God’s help.	
5 mins	<b>Small groups/Breakout rooms</b> <i>Have the group discuss the question in pairs for two minutes, then shout out their answers to be recorded on the flipchart or Zoom chat.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Can you identify things that church communities might cling to that get in the way of what God might be doing?</li></ul>	Flipchart
5 mins	<b>Personal reflection</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Allow yourself to notice that God is gazing upon you with great love. Nothing you can do can make God love you more. Nothing you can do can make God love you less.</li><li>• Ask God to help you notice if there is anything that matters so much to you that you struggle to hear anyone express a different view, or you lose your sense of peace if it is threatened.</li><li>• Allow God to show you something of what might be offered to you when you open your hands to God.</li></ul>	
5 mins	<b>Homework</b> Commit yourself to practicing the Examen (even a shortened version) every day until the group meets again. The Examen is essentially practicing the discipline of discernment in your day to day life.	





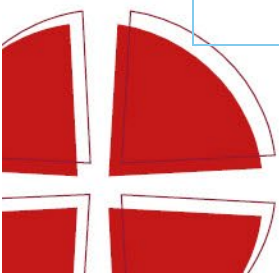
	Try to notice when you feel a sense of consolation or desolation in your day-to-day life. What is God showing you?	
	Finish	





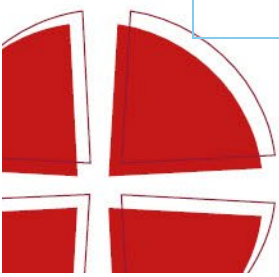
## Session 3: Decision Making

Timings		Resources
5 mins	<p><b>Welcome and introduction</b></p> <p>In this session we will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explore how we use our discernment, paying attention to how and where God is at work, to inform our decisions.</li><li>• Explore how to discern what decision needs to be made.</li><li>• Reflect on timeframes and ways of making decisions.</li></ul>	
10 mins	<p><b>Opening prayer</b></p> <p>In Lectio Divina the aim is not to 'find meaning' but to listen to the passage in a way that allows us to hear how God is speaking to us personally today. Try to listen openly and playfully, not trying to find an insight or sermon, but the word or phrase that resonates today. Ask God to guide us as we pray.</p> <p><i>Invite a group member to read the following passage three times.</i></p> <p>Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.</p> <p>Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.</p> <p>Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.</p>	



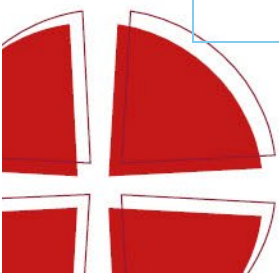
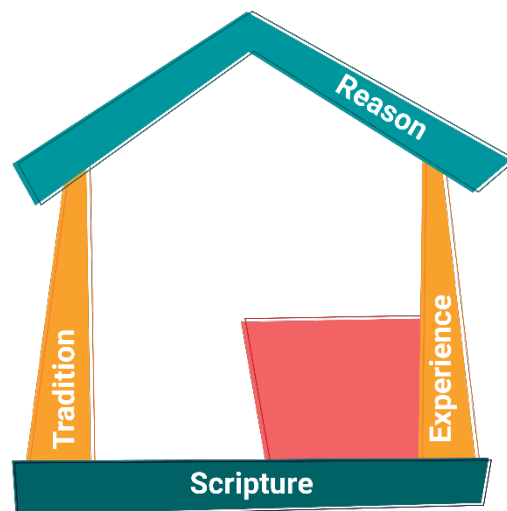


	<p>Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD! (Psalm 25:4-7)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow one word or phrase to linger with you that nourishes or calms you.</li> <li>• Stay with it, turning it over in your heart.</li> <li>• If you want, write the word or phrase down, and take some time to colour or decorate it.</li> </ul>	
<b>5 mins</b>	<p><b>Small groups/ Breakout rooms (in pairs or threes)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take five minutes to share what stayed with you from the prayer. Notice how it has moved you.</li> <li>• Remember, the intention is not to preach or draw lessons for others from the text, but to notice how a word or phrase moved or enriched you.</li> </ul>	
<b>2 mins</b>	<p><b>Remember prayer and discernment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As we move into decision making, we carry the insights of discernment and a commitment to paying close attention to God with us.</li> <li>• We are familiar with particular ways of making decisions. We seek to be rational, logical and clear-headed. We bring the skills of decision making from the secular world into the world of Church. All of these skills are important and useful. In discernment, however, they are not the most important thing. Few would describe seeking the heart of God as rational or logical. Rather it is an</li> </ul>	<p>A flipchart with a sketch of the Methodist quadrilateral OR the image on PowerPoint.</p>





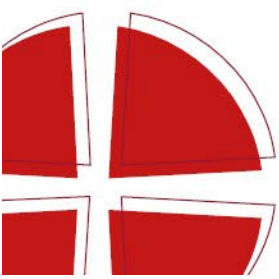
	<p>exercise of love and profound trust. That doesn't make it illogical, but it is a different kind of logic than that of the boardroom. This is deeply uncomfortable for most of us.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Methodist quadrilateral of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience is primarily a theological tool by which Methodists form their theology. It is a theological tool first and foremost and recognises that each of the four elements together contribute to our understanding of God and interpretation of Scripture. The quadrilateral can also be used as a tool in forming the practical theology present in church decision making. The quadrilateral does not make reason king. Nor should we. Acting with the mind of Christ will involve stepping out of our comfort zone.</li></ul>	
8 mins	<p><b>Small groups/Breakout rooms</b></p> <p>The Methodist quadrilateral is Scripture, tradition, reason and experience.</p>	





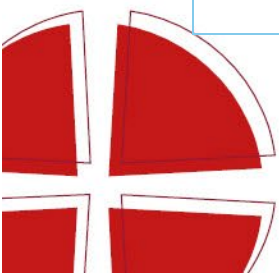


	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Which do you feel most Methodist groups are more comfortable with?</li><li>• Have you had experience of decision making that tried to make room for all four segments? What was that like?</li></ul>	
<b>8 mins</b>	<p><b>What decision?</b></p> <p>The first step of discerning decision making is to ask what the decision is that needs to be made. Some basic principles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We need to give God the freedom to surprise us. By not discerning the question at the very beginning, assuming that it is obvious, we tell God about what we want to hear or not hear – God may speak, but within our boundaries. The question may seem obvious, but there may be more than one way of asking it. For example ‘how do we get more young people into our church?’ is different than ‘how can our church best serve young people?’ which is different from ‘what age group is God inviting us to support at this stage in the congregation’s life?’ Each would begin a very different conversation.</li><li>• It is better to begin with a wide question and discern gradually so that it narrows, than to begin with a narrow question which prevents inclusion of wider considerations. ‘What might our worship look like at this stage of the congregation’s life?’ vs ‘should we buy one drumkit or two?’</li></ul>	



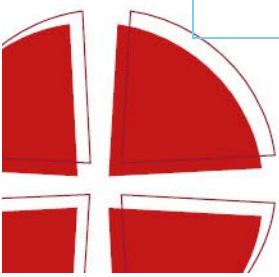


	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In group discernment, how you agree the question sends a signal of how the decision will eventually be made.</li> <li>• We need to remember the importance of understandings of God. At its heart, discernment is not 'what is God asking of us' but 'where am I/are we being invited to join in with what God is doing in this place'. The initiative is God's, and we are paying attention to it in order to cooperate. It is not our initiative which we expect God to notice and bless.</li> </ul>	
<b>4 mins</b>	<p><b>Gathering information</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Part of fact gathering is admitting to what we don't know so that we can learn. We all know the super-confident person who says 'follow me' and then gets lost. Better to say 'I don't know, let's ask for directions'.</li> <li>• Realistically think through your own and your church's gifts. What do you do especially well? Who are your members, their ages, gifts and abilities? What is your church like when it's at its very best? What are your church's limitations?</li> <li>• Accepting 'what is' is not defeatism. It is wisdom. Sometimes you have to let go of what you're holding onto most tightly, so that God can put something new into your hands.</li> <li>• Whose voices are you not hearing? Most churches find some voices easier to listen to than others. Try to listen to everyone in the church – the young people, the dish washers, the quiet prayerful folk. It</li> </ul>	



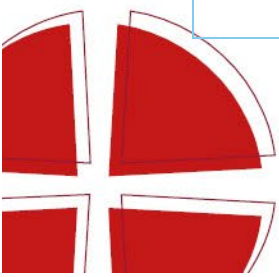


	<p>is easy to assume that one small group's truth is everyone's truth.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ask for views from 'outside' – the worker in the café across the road, members of other churches, the activity group leader who uses the halls, church members' non-attending spouses or children and so on. Widening your perspective can give a clearer view.</li><li>• As you listen to the facts, do so discerningly. Where do you feel drawn? What unsettles you? What thought or insight or word keeps getting your attention? What fills you with hope?</li></ul>	
<b>3 mins</b>	<p><b>Small groups/ Breakout rooms (in pairs)</b></p> <p>Who might not be included in the church's decision making processes? How might they be included?</p>	
<b>5 mins</b>	<p><b>Deciding a timeframe for decisions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• One metaphor for discernment is wandering around in a forest, not knowing what you're looking for or where it is to be found, but with absolute conviction that something deeply good is there to be found. This can feel deeply frustrating, particularly for people more comfortable being active and decisive.</li><li>• Taking our time feels uncomfortable. We like to be active, to be productive, to be doing things. Sometimes discernment requires sitting still, waiting, listening, trusting that the still small voice of God will speak.</li><li>• Decision making is likely to require several stages of discernment:</li></ul>	



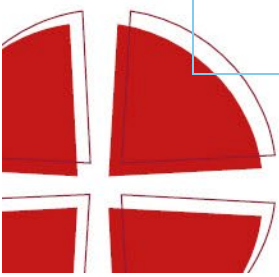


	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ the initial recognition that a decision needs to be made.</li> <li>○ Who needs to be involved?</li> <li>○ What is the decision that needs to be made?</li> <li>○ How will we gather the information we need (and a pause while it is gathered)?</li> <li>○ How will we listen well to each other?</li> <li>○ What methods will we use to decide?</li> <li>○ How will we ensure that the decision continues to feel right?</li> <li>○ How will we implement the decision?</li> </ul> <p>At each of these stages, time for prayer and paying attention to God needs to be built into the process.</p>	
10 mins	<b>Small groups/ Breakout rooms</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remember a church or group decision that was good, and one that was problematic.</li> <li>• What happened in the decision making process that made it good or less good?</li> </ul>	
10 mins	<b>Some modes of decision making</b> <p><b>Sudden clarity/Blinding flash</b></p> <p>Sometime something just becomes clear – the Damascus experience. This can happen for individuals or groups. Sometimes a person speaks and it strikes everyone with such a deep sense of consolation that the way ahead becomes clear. It's not common, but it does happen.</p>	





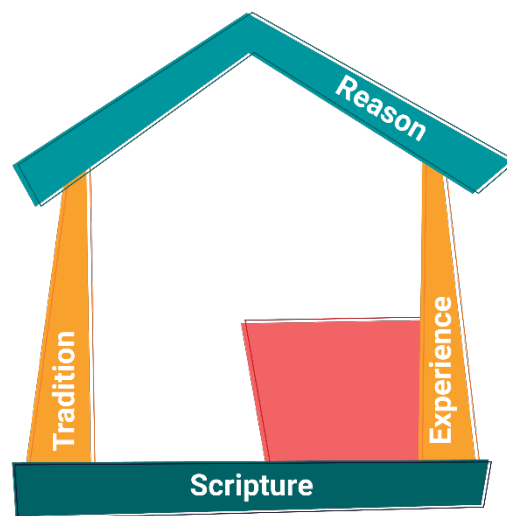
	<p><b>Paying attention to consolation and desolation</b></p> <p>When we sit with the options, we notice that our moods or emotions change as we consider options. We notice what happens when we sit with a particular option. We listen with our whole selves as others speak, and notice how their words and thoughts touch us. As we listen to God, pay attention to each other and ask for God's guidance, a sense of consensus can emerge.</p> <p><b>Working it out</b></p> <p>There are a number of approaches here, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis of different options</li> <li>• Identifying advantages and disadvantages</li> <li>• Imagining your church in 5/10/50 years and asking how each decision feels from that position.</li> </ul> <p>What is important is continuing discernment – leave room for God to move within the process.</p>	
10 mins	<p><b>Self in decision making – Group activity</b></p> <p><i>If working in person, create an imaginary line across the room and ask people to locate themselves on that continuum (or the Methodist quadrilateral, although this may involve participants placing a foot in two different sectors). If working online, use a line in Zoom whiteboard and ask people to mark where they would position themselves. For each statement below, indicate which end of the continuum represents each opposing view.</i></p> <div> <div>Agree</div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div>Disagree</div> </div>	Zoom whiteboard, if working online.





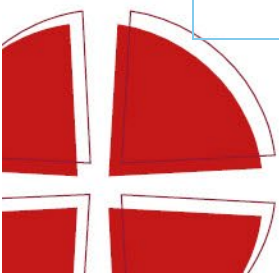
It is good to know your own decision making personality:

- Do you want to open up more and more options, or do you want to narrow options as soon as possible?
- Do you prevaricate and procrastinate as long as possible or rush to a conclusion?
- Which do you find more uncomfortable – certainty or uncertainty?
- In the Methodist quadrilateral of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, which do tend to find it easiest to prioritise?



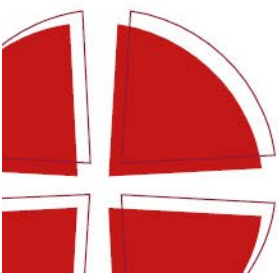
**For personal reflection**

- What are your preferred 'ways of knowing' and what 'ways of knowing' do you tend to discount or dismiss?
- What is your wisdom that you find easy to share with the group, and what wisdom are you more reluctant to share?



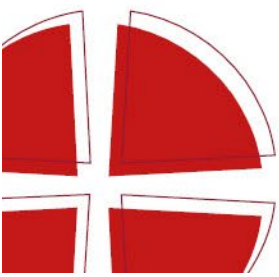


	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How might your decision making personality help and hinder wider group decision making?</li> </ul>	
<b>2 mins</b>	<p><b>A final principle</b></p> <p>Decision making is not prophecy. A well-made, discerned decision may not work out. A poorly made decision may somehow come right. We are essentially seeking to come to a place where we desire what God desires, understanding that life and circumstances are constantly in flux. Discernment deepens our relationship with God and builds our muscles for paying attention. It is never wasted.</p>	
<b>3 mins</b>	<p><b>Homework</b></p> <p>Spend some time considering ways of asking a discernment question that is important in your life/your church's life at the moment. How does changing the wording of the question change how you respond?</p>	
<b>5 mins</b>	<p><b>Closing Prayer</b></p> <p><i>Ask a member of the group to read this passage again.</i></p> <p>Make me to know your ways, O LORD;              teach me your paths.</p> <p>Lead me in your truth, and teach me,              for you are the God of my salvation;              for you I wait all day long.</p> <p>Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,              for they have been from of old.</p>	





	<p>Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;</p> <p>according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD! (Psalm 25:4-7)</p> <p>Return to the word or phrase that moved you at the beginning of the session. How is it sitting with you now?</p>	
	<b>Finish</b>	

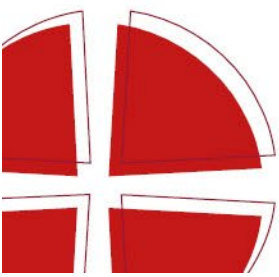






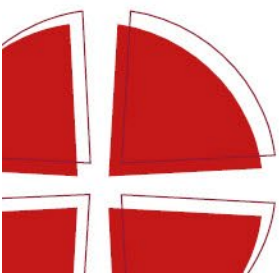
## Session 4: Making Decisions Together

Timings		Resources
5 mins	<p><b>Welcome and introductions</b></p> <p>In this session we will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explore ways of listening to God together.</li><li>• Consider ways of seeking consensus.</li><li>• Recognise the importance of allowing time for confirmation.</li></ul>	
15 mins	<p><b>Opening Prayer</b></p> <p><i>This exercise can be challenging. If unaware of the participant's church or community context and local geography, spend a few minutes now learning from the group about their church/community demographics and context. Spend some time considering the group's context and where they might want to focus their attention in the prayer. You may want to remind the group to be open and generous, aware that lots of different types of prayer work for different people.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pause for a moment, remember God gazing on you with great love. Ask God to guide your imagination as you pray.</li><li>• Imagine Jesus gazing at the globe. Imagine how he is moved as he looks at the earth.</li><li>• Imagine Jesus' focus narrows to look at your church/community.</li><li>• Gazing at the church/community, what happens in Jesus' heart? What is the expression on his face?</li></ul>	



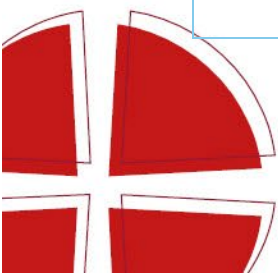


	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• As you move through the church doors, follow Jesus' gaze. What does he see? What does he notice?</li><li>• In your imagination, what time of day is it, who is present and what is happening? Who or what is Jesus drawn to?</li><li>• Is there an event, a group, a particular place or individual where Jesus' gaze lingers?</li><li>• Allow yourself to sit for a moment with Jesus, noticing what he notices.</li><li>• Spend some time talking with Jesus about what he has noticed and what you have noticed.</li></ul>	
5 mins	<p><b>Listening and sharing well</b></p> <p>In a moment we'll share something of what we experienced in this prayer.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In listening group, people share in turn. We speak without interruption (you may choose to put a time limit on this). We share our own experience without generalising, not 'this tells us all that' but 'for me this means'.</li><li>• When we are finished people may ask for clarification 'when you say 'surprised' what surprised you?', but not critique or judge.</li><li>• A listening group is <b>not</b> a discussion.</li><li>• Listening asks you to be other-focused, to seek to understand, even if you don't agree.</li><li>• This way of listening can take a little getting used to if you are used to discussion and debate – give</li></ul>	



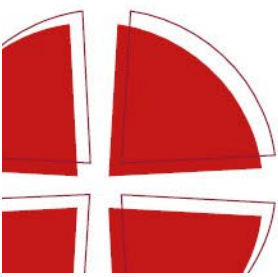


	each permission to remind each other that we are listening, not debating.	
<b>10 mins</b>	<b>Small groups/ Breakout rooms (in groups of three)</b> In turn, listen to each other's experience of the prayer exercise.	
<b>5 mins</b>	<b>Establishing a discerning community</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Where possible, spend time together outside of formal sessions – and avoid coffee break factions. Eat together and pray together as much as possible. Try to disrupt established seating preferences and groups, asking people to sit at different tables, or move according to 'Have you ever... visited Spain, been in a helicopter, held a baby chick, seen a red squirrel?' questions.</li><li>• At the beginning of a meeting, try icebreaker questions like:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ One thing no-one here knows about me</li><li>○ My favourite thing to do as a child</li><li>○ The best holiday I've ever had.</li><li>○ One thing I love about this church/group/community/area.</li></ul></li><li>• Establishing a working together agreement, and having it displayed where everyone can see it will help. It is best to develop this together. Two Scripture passages that may help are Galatians 5:22-23 or Philippians 4:8, or the agreement used in Session 1 of this course.</li><li>• Before meeting, it is important to have asked everyone in the community to pray – at least daily</li></ul>	



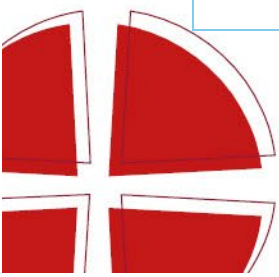


	<p>for a week – and to be committed to paying attention to God.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gather with the understanding that God is present and actively involved. Build time with God into the decision making process, particular in points of tension or stress.</li> <li>• You will always be deciding between good things (hopefully), but one will be a better fit than others. It is the 'nos' that make the 'yeses' count.</li> <li>• Understand that uncertainty is profoundly uncomfortable and people may blame you because of how the 'in between' state is making them feel. Try to be open and honest about the challenge of that, and to find ways to support each other when leadership is difficult.</li> </ul>	
<b>5 mins</b>	<p><b>Small groups/ Breakout rooms</b></p> <p>When meeting to discern a decision together, what needs to be included in the working together agreement?</p>	
<b>10 mins</b>	<p><b>A possible process for gathered discernment</b></p> <p><b>Before the meeting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A shared commitment to prayer</li> <li>• Identification of the discernment question gathering and sharing of the necessary information</li> </ul> <p><b>During the meeting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Firstly, there is a shared understanding that people have been engaged in prayer and discernment before the group gathers.</li> </ul>	



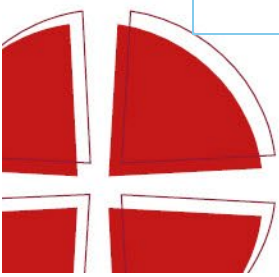


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|--|---|--|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A time of shared prayer together. This prayer should not be spoken intercessory as people can use this to establish their position, with God in their side eg. 'O Lord, help us all to realise that it is so much more in keeping with your Kingdom if we do X instead of Y'. Try the imaginative exercise above, Lectio with Psalm 139 or the understandings of God exercise from Session 1.</li><li>• The discernment question is identified (you may want to have it visible on a flip chart).</li><li>• Agree the working together agreement. You may want people to symbolically 'put down' their personal preferences and biases (write them on a card, fold it and place them before some symbol of God's presence).</li><li>• Relevant information is presented. Questions of clarification may be needed here, but they come from a place of seeking understanding rather than trying to change minds or prove a point.</li><li>• A brief pause to allow people to notice God's presence.</li><li>• A first round of sharing of what people are noticing.</li><li>• A second pause to notice God's presence.</li><li>• A second round of sharing of what people are noticing, having heard each other speak.</li><li>• A facilitator or group member summarises what they are hearing.</li><li>• A longer pause – encourage people to sit with what they have heard and the decision, in God's presence.</li></ul> |  |
|--|---|--|



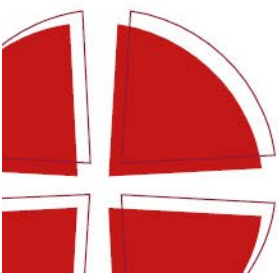


	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A third round of sharing. What decision are people leaning towards? Again, clarification may be important, but not debate.</li> <li>• It may be that a decision now emerges (see below if not).</li> <li>• Pause with the decision, allow people to notice if it 'sits right'.</li> <li>• Finish with a prayer of gratitude.</li> </ul>	
<b>10 mins</b>	<p><b>Consensus seeking</b></p> <p>Surprisingly often, a process of quiet, prayerful listening creates consensus in the group.</p> <p>When this does not happen, people can be invited to identify their position, possibly by creating a continuum in the room between wholehearted agreement and complete disagreement and asking people to locate themselves along it.</p> <p><i>Create a continuum with the four positions below:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ I am wholehearted agreement with this decision.</li> <li>○ I am in agreement, but have some reservations.</li> <li>○ I have major reservations, but I can live with it.</li> <li>○ I cannot accept this decision.</li> </ul> <p>If a third of the group are in the third or fourth group, the process may need to begin again.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If tensions build:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Pause</li> <li>○ Become aware of God's presence</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	





	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Become aware of who God is calling us to be (as individuals and a group)</li> <li>○ Remember the Working Together Agreement</li> </ul>	
<b>7 mins</b>	<b>Group discussion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does this approach make you feel?</li> <li>• How might it work in your context?</li> <li>• What might the struggles be?</li> </ul>	
<b>5 mins</b>	<b>Confirmation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beware 'decision relief'. Days are often planned to 'go to the wire', the final prayer reduced from ten minutes to five to one if time is tight. There is a sense that a decision must be made. Sometimes people need time to adjust their thinking.</li> <li>• Ideally give people time to sit with the decision that's been made, before its finalised. This might be considered 'living as if' for a week, really letting the decision sink in. Then checking 'does this still feel right' or 'is this really chiming with who we are'.</li> <li>• Allow yourself to accept that the 'final' decision might not be final. You might learn a lot, but not gain what you were aiming for. You may eliminate one option that you knew needed exploration, but still need to discern the next step.</li> </ul>	
<b>8 mins</b>	<b>Personal reflection</b> <p>As you seek to move forward, what do you sense God celebrating:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• in you?</li> <li>• in your group?</li> </ul>	





	How does having some understanding of what God is celebrating, change who and how you choose to be in this group?	
<b>5 mins</b>	<b>Closing Prayer</b> Invite each person to share one word of what God is celebrating in the group.	
<b>Finish</b>		

