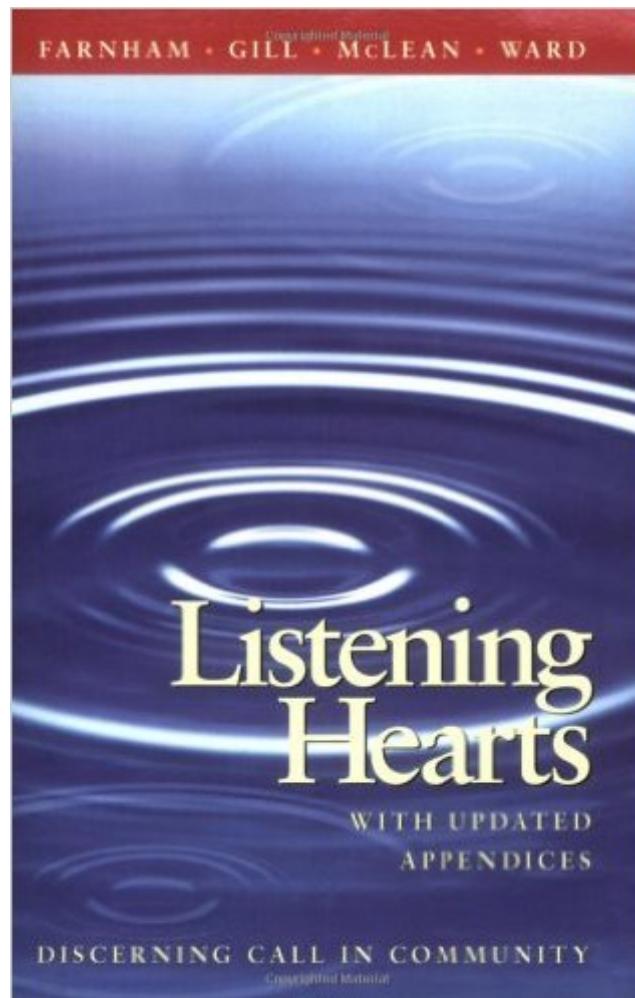


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# Listening Hearts: Discerning Call In Community



## **Synopsis**

This seminal work in the Listening Hearts series draws on centuries of classic Christian literature and the silence of prayerful listening to show how to recognize and define God's call. It explains how to eliminate barriers and prepare one's heart to receive that call - whether it is emphatic, subtle, or seemingly obscure. The authors address the challenge of remaining faithful and attentive to God's call and tell how a faith community can be a source of spiritual, psychological, physical, and financial support. Listening Hearts is designed for use in prayer and meditation and as the basis for group discussion. It provides suggestions on forming discernment groups and ministries, questions to raise in discerning call, as well as an informal history of the ministry and its research methods.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

The issue of discernment, or attempting to understand God's will for us in our lives and the direction it should take, is one on which regrettably too little attention has been spent in the Church until recently. This book answers that dearth of material by presenting what proves to be both an eminently practical and highly instructive method and motive. The method was developed in the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland with great assistance and input from members of the area Quaker community. The Society of Friends influence shows prominently, as the main focus of the process (and it is a process, as opposed to a goal in and of itself) is to discover and arrive at consensus

regarding God's revealed will through reflective prayer rather than convince anyone of anything via cerebral justifications. For this group, the method became the first step in the ordination process, though they are quick to note that the method need not be limited to those seeking ordination, but rather can be used by anyone seeking a discernment of God's will for his or her life. Listening Hearts is replete with quotations and an exhaustive bibliography. At the very least, it serves as a starting point for someone considering a time of discernment. The book is not discouraging of ordained vocations, but instead acknowledges that often discerners too quickly latch onto ordination as the only answer to a vocation in the Church. The method emphasizes prayer and heartfelt reflection as the main means of determining God's will, which is as it should be. Those seeking a time of discernment should read this book for "the other side" of the discussion -- a viewpoint which urges caution, deliberation, and openness to the multiplicity of God's purposes. It provides a strong balance, essential to any spiritual journey.

The method used in creating this book is as moving and powerful as the material itself. The authors centered on prayer and meditation and worked with the Holy Spirit to create a book of sayings that ring true at every turn. But, the book is much more than a group of sayings. It lays out a path for discernment that begins with God, and leads through the self to the community. This path is clearly paved with the Holy Spirit and is ready for all who are willing to make themselves available to God's will.

I read this book about 10 years ago as I began to wrestle with questions of vocation. I felt called to ministry, possibly ordained ministry. I had far more questions than answers and didn't know where to begin. Recommended by my pastor, this book gave me a vocabulary and suggested a process for listening to who God calls me to be. It also offered important advice on the benefits of listening in the context of community. The book is accessible but rich. I found that individual chapters bear rereading at various times in my life. I attribute this to the prayerfulness of the authors, who used many of the discernment ideas they describe in the book to write the book itself. The bibliography is a list of classics on Christian discernment and spirituality that have stood the test of time. Many of the books listed in the bibliography have become important parts of my journey as well. I am glad I read the book and recommend it to others beginning or continuing their own discernment process.

Too many people see 'vocation' as a narrow thing, something that is designed only to ask 'should I become a priest?' or 'should I enter the ministry?' In fact, there are many ways of being God's

servant and following God's call in the world, and the ordained ministries are but one narrow band of this. 'Listening Hearts' is designed to take a community approach to seeing what God's call is in the world. The word 'vocation' comes from the Latin *vocare* -- to call -- and thus has a wide range of meanings, biblical and spiritual, as well as outside accumulations onto the concept. The authors here derive inspiration from the Quaker practice of silence and reflection (a clearness process) as well as other spiritual processes, many of which are elaborated in more detail in works referenced in the bibliography, a great resource for those interested in issues of vocation. A call is different from a job -- a career can be a vocation, in the sense that it encompasses more than 'just a job'; teaching is a career and a vocation, for example. To be a teacher involves more than just being paid to be in a classroom; indeed, one can be a teacher without being employed as one in a school. The same holds true for God's call in ministry -- just as a career (again derivative of more ancient meanings, literally meaning a path one follows, like the career of the earth around the sun) can be narrowly defined or more broadly held, so too can a vocation to ministry be understood in terms of many aspects of living one's life. C.S. Lewis famously discouraged a friend from becoming a priest, fearing that it would cease to be a valid vocation and slip into the 'just a job' kind of situation. Communities, under the ideas presented here, are less susceptible to the kinds of self-deception that some are likely to experience in seeing themselves in certain roles. Are we hearing God's call, or our own desires and petitions? Similarly, ministry is not conducted in a vacuum: ministers act for and with others, and require the support of community for their actions to have efficacy and validity. There is a flaw in this, that is not covered in this book, but one hopes might be addressed at some point in discernment processes: the definition of community is never made clear. What happens when there are competing communities? What happens when the local church is at odds with the regional or national (or international) church? What happens when a discernment group at a local parish supports a particular candidate in a certain vocation, but the distant powers-that-be do not? Another issue that is not addressed in this text, which I feel (given the experience that I and many other have had in discernment processes) needs to be addressed is this: what happens when one is not dealing with a community of integrity? What happens when the rector or a particularly powerful congregation member blocks the discernment process from even beginning? What about institutional issues -- how does the 'listening hearts' process work for a Roman Catholic woman, given that their institution will not recognise a call to priesthood, however much the listening hearts group might see that call clearly? What happens when a hierarch in a local church decides for whatever reason he doesn't like someone, and so doesn't permit a listening hearts group to be formed? It is somewhat irresponsible (but unfortunately has happened, in this

reviewer's experience) that the institution will on the one hand say that discernment cannot be done alone, without community, but then will refuse to be the community in which discernment should be done. The authors here quote an anonymously authored document on servant leadership, which said: to ignore or resist a call may fracture us further, widening the split between what we subscribe to inwardly and what we do outwardly. The authors undoubtedly meant this to mean for individuals that they should not ignore a call from God. They remain mute about what it means for a community to ignore the call, or be left in ignorance about a call. In that regard, this book has a serious flaw. These flaws aside, in any situation where the community does come together in honesty and love to address issues of vocation, this will be a useful and helpful guide, and I have recommended it to many, and indeed used it myself with the group I formed after I left my church, and found many wonderful revelations about myself, about the world, about the nature of vocation, and about God. I truly wish this might have been done in my own 'native' Episcopal community.

Six years ago, my priest used this book with a group of seniors at Gordon College to help us learn more about listening to God in the context of testing our call to ordained ministry. This book is simply incredible. God used it powerfully in my life!

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