

SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

MCMASTER DIVINITY COLLEGE
MS 3XD3/5XD5/6XD6

WENDY J. PORTER, PH.D.

Associate Professor of Music and Worship
McMaster Divinity College
1280 Main Street West
Hamilton, ON L8S 4K1
porterw@mcmaster.ca

Hybrid Course

Online	Face-to-Face	Online
Online (first 6 weeks) begins: Monday, January 7, 2019	Friday, February 22, 2019 and Saturday, February 23, 2019 Location: McMaster Divinity College Room: TBA	Online (final 6 weeks) resumes: Monday, March 4 Final week: Monday, April 8

DPT Students may shape this course towards their specific ministry and professional needs.

MTS and MDiv Specializations: CC/CW/PS
(Church and Culture, Christian Worldview, Pastoral Studies)

Course Description and Invitation

Where is God at work in your life, or in the people, church, community, or culture around you? How can you recognize God at work or discern where he is leading? Every individual, person in ministry, Christian professional or academic needs spiritual discernment and capacity for skillful theological reflection.

This course leads toward awareness of theory, methodology, practice, and the viability of spiritual discernment and theological reflection, whether for ministry, professional or academic work, or personal life. Discernment and reflection is critical to gaining perspective on one's vocation, as the earliest inklings of vocation shift to the realities of lived life and changing perspectives connected with aging or changed circumstances. In this course, you will develop awareness and understanding of discernment as discovered in literature, Christian biography, biblical characters or events, professional or institutional study, and personal experience. Students select the specific resources that are most pertinent to their own development, their own ministry or profession, and their own program at MDC. Through pursuing spiritual discernment in these various areas, students also develop skills in theological reflection, both of which are

crucial to personal spiritual wholeness, professional effectiveness, and successful leadership. Final papers and projects in this course are shaped to the student's own personal, ministerial, or professional needs and interests, and can be done at any MDC degree course level.

Knowing, Being, Doing

Through required reading and assessments, online content, weekly postings, in-class lectures, online and face-to-face class discussions, and completion of assignments, students should fulfill the following course objectives:

Knowing

- explore contemporary and historical perspectives on spiritual discernment.
- become familiar with theories and methodologies of theological reflection.
- discover ways of engaging in discernment and reflection that are relevant for life, ministry, or vocation.

Being

- be shaped by the practice of developing skills in theological reflection.
- be moved by increased awareness of God's leading in historical lives and situations.
- be transformed in small ways through attentive interaction with biblical, historical, literary, and current individuals or scenarios.

Doing

- practice theological reflection and spiritual discernment through weekly postings related to literature, Christian biography, biblical characters or events, relevant church or institutional or professional events, and personal experience.
- increase your own capacity for discernment and theological reflection through thoughtful online responses and in-class discussions.
- develop your own understanding of or approach to spiritual discernment and theological reflection through a final paper or project, shaped towards your own area of professional, ministerial, or academic need.

Course Textbooks*

Required textbooks on spiritual discernment for this course are:

1. Nouwen, Henri, with Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird. *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*. New York: HarperCollins, 2013.
2. Liebert, Elizabeth. *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008.
3. Liebert, Elizabeth. *The Soul of Discernment: A Spiritual Practice for Communities and Institutions*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015.

These three books will be part of our class assessment and discussion during the Face-to-Face days. For instance, Liebert is currently the leading author on spiritual discernment, and what Nouwen had to say on it has been collected together in this book. Come to the class prepared to weigh and evaluate these works as part of our own reflection and discernment.

Reference Books for Preparing In-Class Presentations:

1. Graham, Elaine, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward. *Theological Reflection: Methods*. London: SCM, 2005.

2. Graham, Elaine, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward. *Theological Reflection: Sources*. London: SCM, 2007.

The in-class presentation assignment during our Face-to-Face Days requires that you become familiar with one “method” chapter and the related “sources” chapter, as determined by sign-ups. You are not required to read either book in its entirety, although there is much of substance in them, and you are welcome to consider library copies, where available, or to share with a friend.

Optional:

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings*. Originally published in 1954 and 1955. Revised edn. London: Harper Collins USA, 2002; or 4-volume set including *The Hobbit*, London: HarperCollins, 2001.

This set of books will provide material for a number of theological reflections and observations about discernment during the course. These are not mandatory reading, but they are valuable resources for prompting theological reflection about spiritual discernment.

DPT students choose one:

Authored Book / Monograph. Choose one book that pertains to spiritual discernment / theological reflection and relates to your profession or academic field and/or to your own spiritual life. Select this in consultation with the professor. During the course, show evidence of engaging with this work by drawing on it in weekly assignments and/or in your final assignment. You may find works of interest in the **Theological Reflection: A Selected Bibliography** included at the end of this syllabus.

Textbook Purchase

All required textbooks for this class are available from the College’s book service, READ On Bookstore, Room 145, McMaster Divinity College. Texts may be purchased on the first day of class. For advance purchase, you may contact READ On Bookstore, 5 International Blvd, Etobicoke, Ontario M9W 6H3: phone 416.620.2934; fax 416.622.2308; email books@readon.ca. Other book services may also carry the texts.

Tentative Class Schedule:

ONLINE:

Class 1 – Monday, January 7

- Overview of Course
- Introduction to Spiritual Discernment and Theological Reflection
- Instructor Goals and Expectations for Assignments
- How to Plan for the Face-to-Face Class Days in February

Class 2 – Monday, January 14

- **Thought Prompter:** “*Discernment and...*”

- **DUE: Weekly Posting on Discernment - Literature 1**

Class 3 – Monday, January 21

- **Thought Prompter:** “*Discernment and...* ”
- **DUE: Weekly Posting on Discernment – Literature 2**

Class 4 – Monday, January 28

- **Thought Prompter:** “*Discernment and...* ”
- **DUE: Weekly Posting on Discernment – Literature 3**

Class 5 – Monday, February 4

- **Thought Prompter:** “*Discernment and...* ”
- **DUE: Weekly Posting on Discernment – Christian Biography 1**

Class 6 – Monday, February 11

- **Thought Prompter:** “*Discernment and...* ”
- **DUE: Weekly Posting on Discernment – Christian Biography 2**

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**Hybrid Intensive Week:**

**Monday, February 18 – no postings; prep for Face-to-Face Class Days.**

**FACE-TO-FACE CLASS DAYS:**

**Friday, February 22, 9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.**

**Topics:**

Assessing Liebert and Nouwen on Spiritual Discernment  
Exploring Graham et al. on Theological Reflection Methods

**DUE:** In-Class Presentations: Theological Reflection Methods

**Saturday, February 23**

**MDiv/MTS: 9:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.**

**DPT: 9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.**

Topics: Inviting Spiritual Discernment and Theological Reflection on Vocation  
Other topics TBA

**DUE:** Final Paper or Project Proposal

**DPT students:** Final Paper or Project Proposal, with extended discussion and interaction

**NOTE that attendance is required at both class days for successful completion of the course.**

**Monday, February 25 – no postings; prep for final online weeks.**

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ONLINE:**Class 7 – Monday, March 4**

- **Thought Prompter:** “*Discernment and...*”
- **DUE: Weekly Posting on Discernment – Biblical Character or Event 1**

Class 8 – Monday, March 11

- **Thought Prompter:** “*Discernment and...*”
- **DUE: Weekly Posting on Discernment – Biblical Character or Event 2**

Class 9 – Monday, March 18

- **Thought Prompter:** “*Discernment and...*”
- **DUE: Weekly Posting on Discernment – Biblical Character or Event 3**

Class 10 – Monday, March 25

- **Thought Prompter:** “*Discernment and...*”
- **DUE: Weekly Posting on Discernment – Historical or Current Event: Church, Ministry, Institution, NGO, Family, etc.**
- **DUE: Draft 1 of Final Paper or Project**

Class 11 – Monday, April 1

- **Thought Prompter:** “*Discernment and...*”
- **DUE: Weekly Posting on Discernment – Personal Experience**
- **DUE: Online Introduction to and Personal Reflection on Final Paper or Project—**
Written, approx. 750 words, or Video upload, approx. 5 minutes

Class 12 – Monday, April 8

- **Thought Prompter:** “*Discernment and...*”
- **DUE: Weekly Posting on Discernment – Final Reflection**
- **DUE: Final Draft of Paper or Project**

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**A Learning Community**

My design and hope for this class is that it be a mutual learning community, where each member of the community can grow through positive encouragement, constructive input, and active engagement with one another, with Scripture, with ideas, and in the ongoing development and strengthening of our faith and ministries. I encourage you to take risks in the material that you explore, share, and submit, and I will try to create an environment where you can trust one another with those outcomes. We are all people in process. Come with an openness to be challenged, reshaped or re-formed, and to grow through our mutual learning experience. As professor, I hope to empower each class member to develop as much as you are willing to, and I aim to treat each student with respect and dignity. I am a fellow learner in the community and I will attempt to offer information, reflection, experience, and questions for each of us to reflect on together, and to be hospitable in shaping an environment for each of your contributions. I

welcome the responsibility and opportunity to give thoughtful evaluation and feedback to your thinking, both as you offer it to the class and through written work, so that your growth through this class can be maximized as a result of our collaboration. As a responsible member of our learning community, I expect you to commit yourself to the class throughout the semester that we are together. This means not only that in our class interactions you will endeavor to treat all members of our class with respect and dignity, but that you will come prepared to be fully engaged in and with the class. Your weekly participation is required as it is critical for our learning community to function at an optimal level.

Assignments should be handed in on time and in good order. Late assignments will be docked incrementally, to be determined in collaboration with the class community on the first day. Assignments should be submitted in hard copy on standardized paper.

I try to keep correspondence to standard weekday office hours, so, when possible, I will communicate with you between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. Mondays to Fridays. That does not mean that I cannot be reached earlier or later on these days, but theological reflection on my life and spiritual discernment about it leads me towards an attempt to set and maintain these boundaries.

However, I welcome the opportunity to communicate with each of you outside class time. Please make an appointment with me if you think that I can assist you in your learning experience in any way.

## ASSIGNMENTS

### 1. WEEKLY POST: REFLECTION ON DISCERNMENT

Following the schedule as outlined, post ten thoughtful pieces on spiritual discernment and/or theological reflection, plus a final reflection post. Each week, respond to at least two other people's posts. **1–3.** For the first three weeks (beginning January 14), consider one or more works of literature. For example, describe and assess the role of discernment or theological reflection in a scenario or event or in a specific character. **4–5.** For the next two weeks, focus your post on Christian biography, that is, on the life of a person of Christian faith, whether ancient or recent. **6–8.** Following the Face-to-Face Days, for three weeks, explore and shape your posts around biblical characters or events. **9.** Use this ninth week to focus your post on a relevant event, whether historical or in-the-moment, that relates to an institution; e.g. church, ministry, professional institution, academic institution, NGO, family, etc. **10.** For the tenth post, draw on a personal experience that shows either your own successful or unsuccessful discernment. **11.** In the final week, focus your post on what you have learned in the process of creating and responding to these posts.

#### Length / Total Word Count:

- **MDiv/MTS: 3000 words (10 x 300 words each + final reflection post)**
- **DPT/PhD: 5000–6000 words (10 x 500/600 + final reflection post).**

**Posting Due:** By noon on Wednesday of each class week, according to the schedule. Please note that the timing for these posts is intended to give time to other students to respond by Friday.

**Response Due:** By noon on Friday of each class week. Note that participation is included in the mark for this weekly assignment. Respond to classmate postings with thoughtful insights, observations, and questions that contribute to making this a rewarding communal exploration.

**Mark: 40%**

### **3. IN-CLASS PRESENTATION: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION METHODS**

In order to introduce the class to the range of possibilities in doing theological reflection, and to assist in developing your own approach to theological reflection, students will prepare and creatively present one of the methods included in the *Methods* textbook at our Face-to-Face Days. Sign-ups will take place on the first week of class. Use the two companion reference textbooks as your main starting-point: **Theological Reflection: Methods** and **Theological Reflection: Sources**, as well as any other relevant resources. Each person will likely have approximately 15-20 minutes to:

- creatively present (“sell”) their method;
- introduce interesting key players or contributors (“testimonials” - these may be drawn from the textbook, but consider others that may do something similar);
- articulate how this method is valuable and useful (why someone should adopt it);
- offer a brief critique of the method; and
- innovatively involve the rest of the class in at least one significant portion of the presentation that convinces us that it is a workable method, one worth considering and trying.

Provide some kind of hand-out that gives an outline/overview of the presentation and/or other pertinent information. Come prepared with copies for the class.

**NOTE:** Your presentation should be interesting and creative, and your “product” should be something that others want to consider. Show us how it works. Engage us in trying it out. Convince us that this method is useful and valuable for theological reflection. Marks will be assigned in part on how compelling and interesting you are in presenting your method, as well as your grasp of the essentials of the method.

**Due: Friday, February 22, 2019.**

**Mark: 20%**

### **4. FINAL PAPER OR PROJECT: SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT / THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION**

**Choose either the paper or the project.**

**PAPER:** Research and write a paper that explores one or more aspects of Spiritual Discernment or Theological Reflection in connection with spiritual life. This paper may be exegetical, historical, psychological, cultural, or any other kind of focus that is of interest to you and has relevance for your life and/or profession, ministry, academic pursuit, etc. Choose your topic and discuss your approach in consultation with the professor (communication by email is fine). If you are an MDiv or MTS student, this is an opportunity to develop a written piece that relates to your specialization. If you are a DPT or PhD student, you may shape this towards the kind of work or profession that you envision or in which you are already engaged. Prepare your manuscript according to the MDC Style Guide. Follow the MDC guidelines of a minimum of 10 substantive sources, and document these appropriately. You must also demonstrate deep and reflective thinking: either within the paper, or as an additional piece, provide thoughtful reflection on what you learned in the process of doing this paper. You will present your proposal for your paper at

the Face-to-Face Days. I encourage you to dig deeply and to take meaningful risks in this assignment.

**Paper Length (including footnotes and bibliography):**

- **MDiv / MTS students: 2500–3000 words.**
- **DPT / PhD students: 8000–10,000 words.**

**Due:**

- Proposal: **February 22–23**, In-Class Days
- First Draft of Paper: **March 18**
- Final Draft of Paper: **April 1**
- Post a written, audio, or video summary of your paper or project: **April 8**

**Mark: 40%**

**PROJECT:** Choose a project that allows you to creatively explore one or more aspects of spiritual discernment or theological reflection. Plan to take a risk in what you choose, and how you design and prepare this. Show evidence of a thoughtful and reflective approach. Your project may be a work of art, or a series of small articles, or the materials for a seminar, or numerous other possibilities. You may choose to do something that you have never attempted before (one possibility of taking a “risk”). Consult with the professor before finalizing your topic and mode of delivery (communication by email is fine). Critical to this project is that you provide a thoughtful written reflection that describes what lies behind your project, how your project portrays what you are trying to say or depict, and what you learned or are learning in the process of creating it. You will present your proposal for this project during the Face-to-Face Days. I encourage you to dig deeply and to take meaningful risks in this assignment.

**Project Length and Complexity: To be determined in consultation with the professor.**

**Accompanying Reflection Paper:**

MDiv/MTS Students: 750–1000 words.  
DPT / PhD Students: 1500–2000 words.

**Due:**

- Proposal: **February 22–23**, In-Class Days
- First Draft of Project: **March 18**
- Final Project: **April 1**
- Post a written, audio, or video summary of your paper or project: **April 8**

**Mark: 40%**

**Successful Completion of this Course for Credit** requires that each of the assignments be attempted. Failure to make a valid attempt to complete each of these requirements may constitute grounds for failure of the course. Attendance at the Face-to-Face Days is also required for successful completion of the course.

**Statement on Academic Honesty**

Academic dishonesty is a serious offence that may take any number of forms, including plagiarism, the submission of work that is not one’s own or for which previous credit has been obtained, and/or unauthorized collaboration with other students. Academic dishonesty can result in severe consequences, e.g., failure of the assignment, failure of the course, a notation on one’s



academic transcript, and/or suspension or expulsion from the College. Students are responsible for understanding what constitutes academic dishonesty. Please refer to the Divinity College Statement on Academic Honesty

~ <https://www.mcmasterdivinity.ca/programs/rules-regulations>

**Gender Inclusive Language**

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all its publications. It is expected that inclusive language will be used in chapel services and all MDC assignments. In reference to biblical texts, the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God should be respected, but you will need to use gender-inclusive language for humans, and you will need to quote from a gender-inclusive version such as the following: NRSV (1989), NCV (1991), TEV/GNB/GNT (1992), CEV (1995), NLT (1996), TNIV (2005), and the Common English Bible (CEB 2011).

**Style**

All stylistic considerations (including but not limited to questions of formatting, footnotes, and bibliographic references) must conform to the McMaster Divinity College Style Guidelines for Essays and

Theses: <https://www.mcmasterdivinity.ca/sites/default/files/documents/mdcstyleguide.pdf>

Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions.

**Disclaimer**

This syllabus is the property of the instructor and is prepared with currently available information. The instructor reserves the right to make changes and revisions.

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Theological Reflection: A Selected Bibliography

- Ballard, Paul, and John Pritchard. *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society*. 2nd edn. London: SPCK, 1996, 2006.
- Cameron, Helen, John Reader, and Victoria Slater, with Christopher Rowland. *Theological Reflection for Human Flourishing: Pastoral Practice and Public Theology*. London, UK: SCM, 2012.
- Collins, Raymond. *Models of Theological Reflection*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984.
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- Osmer, Richard R. *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008.
- Osmer, Richard R., and Friedrich L. Schweitzer, eds. *Developing a Public Faith: New Directions in Practical Theology*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2003.
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- Patton, John. *From Ministry to Theology: Pastoral Action and Reflection*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1990, repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009.
- Patton, John. *Pastoral Care in Context: An Introduction to Pastoral Care*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993.
- Paver, John E. *Theological Reflection and Education for Ministry: The Search for Integration in Theology*. Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology. Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2006.
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