

SPIRITUAL WISDOM AND DISCERNMENT

MCMASTER DIVINITY COLLEGE COURSE SYLLABUS

MS 3XD3/5XD5/6XD6 – Fall Term 2020

(CC/CW/PS)

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Hybrid Course Schedule – Note that the Face to Face days and times have been changed.

Online	REVISED Face-to-Face Days*	Online
Online begins Monday, September 14, 2020 (first 5 weeks)	FRIDAY, October 23, 2020 1:30 p.m. – 5:30 p.m. (afternoon) and SATURDAY, October 24, 2020 9:00 a.m. – 5:30 p.m. (all day)	Online resumes Monday, November 2, 2020 (last 6 weeks). Final week begins December 7.

*NOTE: These dates are scheduled as face-to-face at MDC. However, if Covid-19 precautions make this unfeasible, these dates and times will be for synchronous online class meetings instead. Updates will be posted on the MDC website, and this syllabus will be revised accordingly. Please be in touch if you have other Covid-related concerns.

PhD Students: Contact me to discuss how to shape this course to align with research interests.

DPT Students: Shape your assignments towards specific ministry and professional needs related to your practice and focus in the program. Contact me about this.

MTS and MDiv Students: Direct at least one major assignment towards your specialization (CC–Church and Culture /CW–Christian Worldview/PS–Pastoral Studies). Provide at least a paragraph to describe how the assignment supports your specialization.

Course Description

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 wisdom and discernment, and the capacity for skillful and insightful theological reflection.

This course develops awareness of theory, methodology, practice, and the viability of spiritual wisdom and discernment in ministry, in professional and academic work, and in personal life. Wisdom and discernment developed through reflection are critical to gaining perspective on one's vocation as the realities of lived life and changing perspectives connected with aging or changed circumstances begin to call these into question. In this course, you will develop perception and understanding of spiritual wisdom and 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 wisdom and discernment in these various areas, students also develop skills in

theological reflection that are crucial to personal spiritual wholeness, professional effectiveness, academic integrity, 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 with classmates, and completion of assignments, students should fulfill the following course objectives:

Knowing

- explore contemporary and historical perspectives on spiritual wisdom and discernment.
- discover ways of engaging in spiritual wisdom and discernment through reflection that are relevant for life, ministry, and 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 on wisdom and discernment through weekly postings.
- increase your capacity for wisdom and discernment through thoughtful reflection.
- develop your understanding of or approach to spiritual wisdom and discernment in papers or projects, shaped towards your own area of professional, ministerial, or academic need.

Required Course Textbooks

1. Ford, David F. *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. This book lays out an approach to understanding what Scripture has to say about Christian wisdom, and how it might be applied in a complex world. This book should be available as an e-book through McMaster Library.
2. Liebert, Elizabeth. *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008. Liebert is a leading author on the practice of spiritual discernment, and this is her foundational book on the subject.
3. Liebert, Elizabeth. *The Soul of Discernment: A Spiritual Practice for Communities and Institutions*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015. This second of Liebert's books builds on her first, moving from personal application to communal and institutional application. You should explore her previous work first, then this one.

Suggested Supplemental Reading

- Bass, Dorothy C., Kathleen A. Cahalan, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, James R. Nieman, and Christian B. Scharen. *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016. This co-authored book brings practical theologians together to discuss this ancient topic, but one that is relatively recent in pastoral theology.
- Nouwen, Henri, with Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird. *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*. New York: HarperCollins, 2013. Nouwen's thoughts on spiritual discernment have been collected together in this book, published after he died.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings*. Originally published in 1954 and 1955. Revised edn. London: Harper Collins USA, 2002. *The Hobbit*, London: HarperCollins, 2001. Tolkien's stories are rich with examples of characters who do or do not pursue wisdom and discernment. Consider them as optional reading for reflection.

PhD/DPT students should choose an additional authored book/monograph:

Choose an additional substantive book that pertains to spiritual wisdom or discernment and relates to your profession or academic field, 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 major assignments.

Textbook Purchase

Required textbooks for this class are available from the College’s book service, READ On, located in the new Hurlburt Family Bookstore, located beside the Chapel entrance opposite Cullen Hall, at McMaster Divinity College. It will be opening September 8, 2020, **by appointment only**, due to COVID-19 safety measures. For advance purchase, you may contact Bernice Quek at the following: READ On, 5 International Blvd, Etobicoke, Ontario M9W 6H3. Phone 416.620.2934. Fax 416.622.2308. Email books@readon.ca. Note that the David Ford book is available as an e-book through McMaster Library (Mills).

Tentative Class Schedule:

<p>ONLINE (5 weeks): Class 1 – Monday, September 14 Overview of Course, Technology, Assignments, Goals and Expectations Introduction to Spiritual Wisdom and Discernment Planning for the Face-to-Face Class Days in October Personal Introductions (via Padlet): Post 1–2 minute personal intro videos.</p>
<p>Class 2 – Monday, September 21 Theological Reflection: The Key to Wisdom and Discernment Liebert on Personal Discernment (Book 1): chs. 1–2; Ford on Wisdom: Intro and ch. 1 Due: Padlet Post 1– Literature 1</p>
<p>Class 3 – Monday, September 28 Intentionality and the Practice of Noticing: It’s All in How You See Liebert on Personal Discernment: chs. 3–6; Ford on Wisdom: chs. 2–3 Due: Padlet Post 2– Literature 2</p>
<p>Class 4 – Monday, October 5 Where Is God in This? Liebert on Personal Discernment: chs. 7–10; Ford on Wisdom: ch. 4 Due: Padlet Post 3– Christian Biography 1</p>
<p>Class 5 – Monday, October 12 Spiritual Autobiography and Wisdom/Discernment Liebert on Personal Discernment: ch. 11; Ford on Wisdom: ch. 5 Due: Padlet Post 4– Christian Biography 2</p>
<p>Due: Wednesday, October 21: First major assignment.</p>

<p>REVISED FACE-TO-FACE CLASS DAYS: Friday, October 23, 1:30 p.m. – 5:30 p.m. (afternoon) Possible sessions: “Is there Space for Contemplation in Chaos?” “Spiritual Freedom and the Essence of the Question: Unexpected Answers in Gadamer” “Listen to Your Life” “Practices of Faith and Wisdom/Discernment”</p> <p>Saturday, October 24 9:00 a.m. – 5:30 p.m. (all day) Possible sessions: “Discerning in-the-Moment” “To Do or To Be?: A Question for Wisdom and Discernment” “Little Moves of Wisdom and Discernment—in Communities” “Spiritual Wisdom and Discernment on Vocation” DUE: Informal Class Presentations Attendance is required for successful completion of the course.</p>

<p>Monday, October 26 – No postings this week. Work on Assignment 2.</p>
<p>ONLINE (6 weeks): Class 7 – Monday, November 2 (Topics TBA) Liebert on Communal Discernment (Bk 2): chs. 1–3 + appendices; Ford on Wisdom: ch. 6 Due: Padlet Post 5– Biblical Character or Event 1</p>
<p>Class 8 – Monday, November 9 (Topics TBA) Liebert on Communal Discernment: chs. 4–5 + appendices; Ford on Wisdom: ch. 7 Due: Padlet Post 6– Biblical Character or Event 2</p>
<p>Class 9 – Monday, November 16 (Topics TBA) Liebert on Communal Discernment: chs. 6–8 + appendices; Ford on Wisdom: ch. 8 Due: Padlet Post 7– Event or Institution 1</p>
<p>Class 10 – Monday, November 23 (Topics TBA) Liebert on Communal Discernment; Ford on Wisdom: ch. 9 Due: Padlet Post 8– Event or Institution 2</p>
<p>Class 11 – Monday, November 30 Who Are We, Where Are We, and What Are We Doing? Liebert on Communal Discernment; Ford on Wisdom: ch. 10 Due: Padlet Post 9– Personal Experience Due: Wednesday, November 2: Final major assignment.</p>
<p>Class 12 – Monday, December 7 Spiritual Wisdom and Discernment Wrap-Up Due: Padlet Post 10– Final Reflection and Greetings Due: Online course evaluations</p>

A Learning Community

My hope for this class is that we would be a mutual learning community, where each member of our community can grow through positive encouragement, constructive input, and active engagement with each another, with Scripture, with intellectual ideas, and with practice-based insights. I encourage you to take risks in what you explore, share, and submit, and I will try to foster an environment where we can trust each other 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 of you to develop as much

as you are willing to, and I aim to treat each of you with respect and dignity. I ask for this in return. 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 or projects, 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 each person with respect and dignity, but that you will come prepared to be fully engaged in and with the class. Your weekly participation is required and critical for our learning community to function at an optimal level.

I try to keep class correspondence to weekdays where possible, but I can be reached outside these times and certainly in a crisis. I welcome the opportunity to communicate with you by email or by appointment in an online meeting (Webex, Zoom).

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Weekly Padlet Posts: Reflections, Responses, and Insights (3 weekly parts)—30% (total)

a. **Reflections.** Post a weekly Padlet Reflection on wisdom and discernment following the schedule below. Length: 250 words. Note that late posts often get missed, so don't be late.

The focus areas for these 10 Reflections are as follows:

1–2. Mondays, Sept. 21 and 28: Literature/Media—wisdom/discernment in a character or story.

3–4. Mondays, Oct. 5 and 12: Christian biography—ancient or recent.

5–6. Mondays, Nov. 2 and 9: Biblical Characters or Events.

7–8. Mondays, Nov. 16 and 23: Current or Historical Events or Institutions (church, ministry, professional institution, academic institution, NGO, family institutions, etc.).

9. Monday, Nov. 30: Personal Experience (successful or unsuccessful).

10. Monday, Dec. 7: Final Reflection—something you learned and any final greetings.

Due: These weekly reflection posts are due each Monday by 5:00 p.m.

b. **Responses.** Respond to at least 2 other student Padlet posts each week. Responses should be thoughtful and considerate. Length: 75–100 words.

Due: Responses are due by Thursdays at 5:00 p.m.

c. **Insights.** Make one thoughtful contribution each week to the Insights Padlet, related to the weekly content or readings, or other relevant topics or concerns.

Due: These contributions are also due by Thursdays at 5:00 p.m.

Separate links to weekly Padlets will be provided.

The success of these communal interactions depends on each person posting on time and on your concern and care for one another. Weekly contributions to each segment of this assignment are required for optimal grades. Again, late posts often get missed, so don't be late.

2. Paper or Project 1—30%. Choose either a paper or a project for this assignment. Select a topic that matters to you. This assignment includes a brief informal presentation on Oct. 23/24. **Due:** Wednesday, October 21, 12:00 midnight (via Avenue to Learn or by email). Note that projects with media may need to be embedded and links provided.

Brief Informal Presentation: describe your paper/project and something that you learned through it. Presentations will take place during Face-to-Face days. (If these become online, then presentations will take place online.) Timing to be determined but expect them to be quite short.

a. Paper: Research and write a paper that explores spiritual wisdom or discernment from an exegetical, historical, psychological, cultural, or other perspective that is of value to you personally, or to your professional practice, ministry, or academic field. Choose something that stretches you. Consult with the professor by email about your topic and approach.

DPT or PhD students: shape this towards your profession / practice / academic area.

MDiv or MTS students: develop your specialization. Include a paragraph on how it does this.

All students: Follow the MDC Style Guide <https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/resources-forms/mdc-style-guide/>. Use a minimum of 10–15 substantive sources, and document these accurately. Your research and writing must reflect at least the level of your program. Include a thoughtful reflection on what you learned through this paper (500–750 words). Embed this in the paper or add it at the end.

Risk Factor: I encourage you to take meaningful risks in your assignments. This does not guarantee the highest mark, but it is through some aspect of risk that you will learn the most, and evidence that you have taken a meaningful risk will be reflected in the grading.

DPT / PhD students: 5000–7,000 words

MDiv / MTS students: 2000 words

b. Project: Choose a project in which you explore some aspect of spiritual wisdom or discernment, and that stretches you in meaningful ways. Show evidence of thoughtful reflection. Your project may be a work of art, or teaching materials for a seminar, or any number of other possibilities. You may choose a medium that is familiar or one that you have never attempted before. You **must** consult with the professor (by email) before finalizing your subject and mode of delivery. Critical to this project is that you provide a thoughtful written reflection (see word counts below) that describes what you learned.

Risk Factor: I encourage you to take meaningful risks in your assignments. This does not guarantee the highest mark, but it is through some aspect of risk that you will learn the most, and evidence that you have taken a meaningful risk will be reflected in the grading.

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

Accompanying Reflection Paper:

DPT / PhD Students: 1500–2000 words

MDiv/MTS Students: 750–1000 words

3. Paper or Project 2—40%. Choose either a paper or a project.

Due: Monday, November 30, 12:00 midnight (via Avenue to Learn or by email). Note that project media may need to be embedded and links provided.

a. Paper: See the above description, but no presentation is required, and the final assignment is more extensive (see word counts below). This paper could build on the first assignment, but this

should be determined in consultation with the professor. Again, your research and writing must reflect at least the level of your program.

DPT / PhD students: 8000–10,000 words

MDiv / MTS students: 3000 words

b. Project: See the above description, but no presentation is required, and the final assignment is more extensive in length or complexity. This project could build on the first assignment, but this should be determined in consultation with the professor.

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

Accompanying Reflection Paper:

DPT / PhD Students: 1500–2000 words

MDiv/MTS Students: 750–1000 words

Successful Completion of this Course for Credit: This 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 required for successful completion of the course. Late assignments may result in incrementally reduced grades.

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://mcmasterdivinity.ca/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).

Writing 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 <http://mcmasterdivinity.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/mdcstyleguide.pdf>. Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions.

Deadlines and Late Submission Penalty: Assignments should be submitted on time and in good order. Late assignments may be docked incrementally up to 2% per calendar day. Submit assignments electronically either to Avenue to Learn or by email. If there are issues that could prevent your timely or successful completion of an assignment, be in touch with the instructor immediately to discuss possible alternatives. Be proactive—do not leave this to the last minute.

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.

Selected Bibliography

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