

How do you know God's plans for your life?

By [Elizabeth Hagan](#)

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As I'm getting back in the swing of the more structured pastoral life again, I am beginning to engage in conversations with folks that sound a lot like this:

"How do I know God's will for my life?" or "How can I know what God wants me to do?"

When I get asked questions like these, I usually feel inadequate (not because I didn't go to seminary or take lots of pastoral care classes) but because it is as if the questioners are asking me to play the role of God in their lives, telling them what they are to do as they face difficult decisions.

At heart, I see the role of a pastor to be [like a spiritual director](#), an intentional relationship between a people and one called out to lead of figuring out what it means to find the presence of God in community. And so, as a pastor I still serve in the role of learner as much as I do a teacher. Thus, for me to give a specific answer to "This is what God wants from you" with complete authority can often be off base and misstated. One of my favorite [prayers from Thomas Merton](#) speaks of the fact that as much as we think we are doing God's will, we may not be.

So, if even pastor types can not speak definitively for God with absolute certainty, then how can we know? How can we discern God's steps for us when we reach junctures of big decisions?

I would have once answered this question by saying large amounts of time need to be offered up to God sitting quietly in the woods or taking residence in prayer closets. I would have said that if you diligently search the scriptures, an answer from the pages would come. Or, I would have said that if the decision leads to more folks coming to know of Christ, then of course it was the right one. (Can you tell I used to be an evangelical?)

But, as I've grown in faith, I've come to see a way of discernment that doesn't always have to include words shouted from the heavens with my name in them or

having moments of great epiphany in prayer. It's actually much more messy than this. Sometimes as much as we think we know, we don't. My spiritual director always says meaning is revealed (which I find frustrating of course).

So from my own experience (which again is just my own experience) this is what I know:

Sometimes, actually often, discernment for me now looks like the simple practice of putting one step in front of another and seeing what comes. Knowing that as I go down a path, the Spirit can be trusted to show me where I am to be and where red flags are shouting "stay away, go the other direction."

Sometimes discernment comes in a word of a friend that I can't seem to get out of my mind.

Sometimes discernment comes as intuition that I believe from my heart that can't be shaken, no matter what occurs.

Sometimes discernment comes as pieces of a life fall together in ways that I know I could never dream up or orchestrate on my own even if I tried.

Though I am often not much help to those who come to me seeking "the answer" to their troubles, I hope that what I can do as a pastor, as a friend, as a wife is to listen, to say what I hear, and hope for the Spirit to make clear what needs to rise up and what needs to fall away.

Because after all, this is what doing life together is at its best. For as much as I can be this for fellow travelers on the journey, I need the same folks to do this for me too.

Discernment then looks like me walking alongside you, you walking alongside me with open eyes, attentive feet and ears to hear "This is the way, walk in it."

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