



**DISCERNMENT:  
A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT**

**Flowing with the Current of the Spirit  
in Church Meetings**

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*The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.*  
Deuteronomy 30:14

This is the second resource in a two-part series on discernment created for congregational use. The first resource, "Discernment: Grounded in God" focuses on four biblical foundations for personal and group discernment. This resource focuses on simple steps for group discernment gleaned from the Christian tradition.

On the second Monday evening, the church council gathers for its regular monthly meeting. With a full agenda of reports, appointments, and a controversial issue or two to resolve, members of the council work late and go home exhausted. As they leave, one of them confesses, "You know, I'm beginning to dread these meetings. I wonder if there is a better way to do the work of the church."

This particular church council member is not alone in wondering about a better way. Every week church boards and committees meet to make decisions. Sometimes these meetings are Spirit-filled, productive, and life-giving; at other times they drain leaders of energy and seem to accomplish little. Contrary to the business or professional world where the goal of meetings is usually to make quick, productive decisions, the church-doing-business looks different. Although being efficient and productive are not without value, these goals fall short of fulfilling the highest purpose of the body of Christ. Instead, when Christian sisters and brothers come together to do the church's work, we are first of all seeking God's face – that is, we are discerning where God is already at work or desiring to be at work, and we are aligning ourselves with God's purposes and activities. With such a focus, our work together is meant to

deepen and expand our faith. Spirit-led decision-making strengthens our commitment to God and to one another. Guided by the Spirit, we are empowered to live and act as faithful followers of Christ in the world.

### **Exploring a new image for discernment**

In a time when the church desires more clarity, freedom and power in decision-making, a fresh image for discernment might serve us well. Imagine, for example, that God's ways are like the current in a wide river flowing to the sea.<sup>1</sup> To be a discerning church means finding the current, becoming aware of its power, and flowing with the Spirit. The grassy banks of the river on either side are like our scriptures – a trustworthy guide to keep us from straying. The church's history, traditions and wise past practices are markers, like reliable buoys, that keep us in the current and out of harm's way. Flowing with the current, we are guided and upheld by its dynamic energy and reach our

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Beulah Steiner, a spiritual director from Wooster, Ohio, for first suggesting to me this image of spiritual discernment.

destination refreshed and empowered for ministry.

More like a current in a river than a signpost pointing one way, God's ways are vibrant and alive. Thus, for individuals and the church to be in touch with the Spirit is an invigorating journey, not a predictable tour. At its core, the discipline of discernment is the capacity to recognize **where God is** and **where God is not** in our lives. Consequently, the focus of discernment is not so much on what is right or wrong but rather on the dynamic, moving presence of God's Spirit.

Another way of describing discernment is to say that knowing God's will means knowing the mind of Christ. Philippians 2:5 exhorts: "Let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus." John 15:4 uses the image of dwelling or making a home: "Abide in me as I abide in you." As we allow the mind and attitudes of Christ to be formed in us, we are equipped to find the current of God's way.

Years ago a very popular book by Charles Sheldon called *In His Steps* told the story of a man who was seized with one question: What would Jesus do? In every situation he faced, he asked himself that simple question. Put in the plainest terms, spiritual discernment is **knowing and doing what Jesus would do**. Thus finding the current is a matter of recognizing God's voice and God's way in a given human situation.

## **Essential equipment for the journey**

Certain understandings, attitudes and habits are essential equipment for the church as it seeks to find the current of God's river when new decisions and directions are needed. Like the tools and skills a river navigator acquires, these capacities and practices equip both individuals and communities for the sometimes perilous work of discernment. Throughout the history of the church, four key attitudes have been identified as essential equipment for the journey:

### **1 ♦ An expectation that God desires to guide us**

The church's practice of discernment rests on God's identity as a self-revealing God, One who wants to be made known. Not elusive or capricious, the God who created us has not abandoned us but desires to be in an ongoing relationship with us. God loves us passionately and promises over and over again, "I will be your God; you will be my people."

In the incarnation of Jesus Christ, we see how God feels and thinks and how God acts. In the Holy Spirit, who is the presence of the Risen Christ among us, we are promised a guide and companion who will show us the truth (John 16:13). Thus our practice of discernment is rooted in a belief in the Triune God who is present with us and will reveal what is needed for the church to be faithful.

### **2 ♦ A willingness to listen**

Recognizing that we are created in God's image and for fellowship with God, we believe we have an ability to hear and respond to God. Thus a basic capacity required for discernment is a willingness to listen, a readiness to be open to the inner and outer promptings of God's Spirit. Though we also have a capacity to deceive ourselves, we can trust the Spirit dwelling within us and within our sisters and brothers to help us remain honest, open and alert.

### **3 ♦ A commitment to spiritual practices**

Christians through the centuries have nurtured their capacity to listen to God by a variety of spiritual practices. Personal prayer, scripture meditation, silence, journal-keeping, spiritual direction, fasting, and corporate worship have all proven helpful. Beyond these individual practices, leadership groups who desire to find and follow God's current must also engage in communal spiritual practices as a way of nurturing the entire group's capacity to listen to God (some of these practices are discussed in the next section).

### **4 ♦ A response of obedience**

Because **discernment is where prayer and action meet**, it is necessary for those who listen to God to respond with obedience. After a

group has done its best to discern God's way and has received a shared sense of God's leading, it can move forward with confidence. Even though the entire way may not be clear, the group can move toward the future, trusting that God will make further revelations or corrections as needed.

When a group finds itself divided and still unsure how God is leading, it is important not to move ahead but to wait for further guidance. More prayer and listening (both to each other and the community of faith as well as the world beyond) are required. In these situations, it can be helpful to call upon persons from the larger church community for additional guidance and support.

### **Flowing with the current in church meetings**

Although there are many ways for the church to flow with God's Spirit in business and organizational tasks, several models of communal discernment have proven to be especially fruitful. Before these models are implemented, however, leaders need to give attention to two things: 1) the physical space in which the group gathers, and 2) shared understandings of group process.

**Physical space.** For group discernment, a circular seating arrangement is preferred because it suggests participation and collaboration. A circle also makes it possible for members of the group to listen to others with their eyes as well as their ears. Our hopes, fears, and insights are communicated with body language as well as with words.

A lit candle or lamp in the center of the circle helps create a meditative atmosphere and reminds everyone of the presence of Christ's Spirit. Moderate room temperature and comfortable chairs also make it easier for people to do this work.

**Group process.** A thoughtful, leisurely pace is set for discernment by providing time in the beginning to get settled in God's presence (this may include space for silence, scripture reflection, singing and prayer). Members of the group are reminded of their responsibility to

listen with their entire self (intellect, emotion, intuition, will). Each person is asked to speak only for herself or himself and to be as specific as possible (not being hypothetical or abstract). Participants should not interrupt others, formulate what they want to say while others are talking, or challenge others; rather they should pause between speakers and attempt to hear as deeply as possible what another is saying. Usually, each person should be given an opportunity to speak once before anyone speaks twice. Participants should also attempt to listen to the group as a whole, looking for the Spirit's moving in the comments and reflections of the entire group.

With these simple preparations as well as the essential equipment listed in the previous section, groups can choose an appropriate strategy and implement it with confidence and joy.

#### **1 ♦ *Worshipful-Work***

Perhaps the best-known current process for group discernment is one called *Worshipful-Work*, which has been developed by Charles Olsen and his associates (see bibliography). Fundamentally, this approach invites church leadership groups to envision both business and discernment as worship—two parts of the same whole.

Olsen encourages a more intentional awareness of God's Spirit in the midst of committee work by doing away with "bookend prayers" at church meetings. These are the short perfunctory prayers offered at the beginning of a meeting in which we pray "Bless our work, O God," and then, for most of the meeting, do our work without a conscious awareness of God. Instead, prayer and scripture are woven in and out of the group's work – prayers and songs of thankfulness for what has been accomplished or moments of silence and guided prayer when the group is struggling to find direction.

Olsen suggests that one person, known as a "discernmentarian," can function as the group worship leader. This person does not actively participate in the group's work but instead takes responsibility for providing spiritual direction for the entire group by interjecting moments of

listening, prayer, and singing and offering thoughtful summaries. In addition, Olsen suggests a practice of telling a "master story" (a biblical story) alongside "our story" as a way of letting scripture speak to the situation under discussion.

Although a group can certainly implement this approach simply by reading Olsen's book, *Transforming Church Boards*, many groups have chosen to send a leader for formal training before trying it on their own (see bibliography for information about how to contact Worshipful-Work).

## **2 ♦ Clearness Committee**

The Quaker tradition offers another historically tested group discernment process. Known as the Clearness Committee, this is a practice which brings a group of people together to listen in depth as a person or group reflects on a decision.

In this process, those who are listening refrain from giving advice and instead spend up to three hours asking honest, open questions to help the discerner discover the flow of God's current in their life (for a personal story of how this actually works, see Parker Palmer's, *Let Your Life Speak*, which is listed in the bibliography). Such intense, prayerful listening and questioning set people free to become aware of and examine hidden motives as well as open themselves to fresh, unexplored possibilities.

## **3 ♦ The Sense of the Meeting**

Another Quaker tradition, related to the Clearness Committee, is the practice of listening for the "sense of the meeting" when a group is engaged in discernment. More than consensus, the sense of the meeting moves beyond listening to all the concerns expressed and then negotiating for a solution acceptable to all. It listens beyond what is spoken in words to hear the spirit of the concern in order to discern where God's Spirit is moving and guiding the group. In his pamphlet, *Beyond Consensus: Salvaging the Sense of the Meeting*, Barry Morley explains:

...the sense of the meeting is not discovered through competition of ideas. Outcomes should be determined neither by rhetorical skill, nor logical brilliance. The test of reason is not the test. Though compromise and moving toward consensus are tools which can assist early in the process, they must be laid aside as we reach for the Inward Presence" (pp. 13-14).

Further, Morley says, "The decision is a by-product. It happens along the way. The purpose of seeking the sense of the meeting is to gather ourselves in unity in the presence of Light" (p. 15). As a form of pastoral care, this process "cares for the whole person and for the whole of the corporate body. Individuals may talk about the sense of the meeting, but until one experiences it as an inward process, it cannot be understood fully" (p. 6).

Sometimes an individual is designated to care for this process on behalf of the group and, at the end, offer a statement summarizing the sense of the meeting. When a conclusion is reached, the group records the decision as a "minute." No action is taken for one month, however. At the next meeting, the decision is reviewed. If the direction still seems to be one that flows with the recognized activity of God's Spirit in their midst, the group is set free to act on the decision.

## **4 ♦ Ignatian Discernment**

Yet another well-developed, historically tested process for communal discernment arises from the Jesuit tradition. One characteristic of this approach is to insist on separating the pro and con sides of an issue for discussion. The community enters into prayer, and all members are required to speak – first the arguments against a decision, then the arguments for a decision. The emphasis in this process is not on forming a consensus but rather on discovering the consensus that is already present.

An additional practice is used in this tradition for situations where an individual or group faces two good alternatives and wants to discern where God's Spirit is flowing. For a designated period of time—perhaps a week or a month—the group lives with one alternative, going about their ordinary routines as though

they have chosen this option. At the end of the designated time, they shift to the other alternative. When the period of testing ends, they come together in prayer to ask, "Which way offers life? Which way does not offer life?" Out of this extended listening, they come to clearer discernment regarding the way of life.

### **Outcome of discernment**

Because spiritual discernment originates in a relationship with a loving God, the outcome of good discernment is a strengthened relationship with God. God does not want us to flounder in ignorance or uncertainty; rather, God desires a lively partnership in which we come to know God's ways ever more intimately and then live joyfully as co-creators with God in the world.

Psalm 66:12 provides a vivid image for the outcome of discernment:

We went through fire and water;  
Yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.

Finding the flow of God's current in the midst of committee work and church business meetings brings us to a spacious place of freedom. Instead of getting stuck in the doldrums or circling, endlessly, we move forward with confidence to act in accordance with God's desires.

Such freedom is contagious! When the people of God are united with God's purposes and with one another, they are a powerful sign of God's life and love in the world. Not only does the church thrive, but the church guides other seekers to a spacious place of freedom and

joy. Thus in the practice of faithful discernment, the church participates in making the channel of God's grace deeper and wider in the world.

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### **Additional Resources for Communal Discernment**

Worshipful-Work.

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