

**TAKE  
BREAK  
RECEIVE**

**The Practice of Discernment  
in the  
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**



**By The Rev. Dr. Ruth Fletcher**

*edited & updated in 2008 by The Rev. Warren Lynn*

A resource offered by  
Disciples Home Missions  
and  
the Office of the General Minister and President  
of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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*“ ... be transformed by the  
renewing of your minds,  
so that you may discern  
what is the will of God ... ”*

*Romans 12:2*



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# A message from our General Minister and President

In 1996, the General Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) set out mission imperatives which focused the whole of the church's ministry on strengthening congregational life for the mission of "being and sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ, witnessing and serving from our doorsteps to the ends of the earth." Each congregation is a "mission station" seeking to live out a particular call to be and to share the gospel.

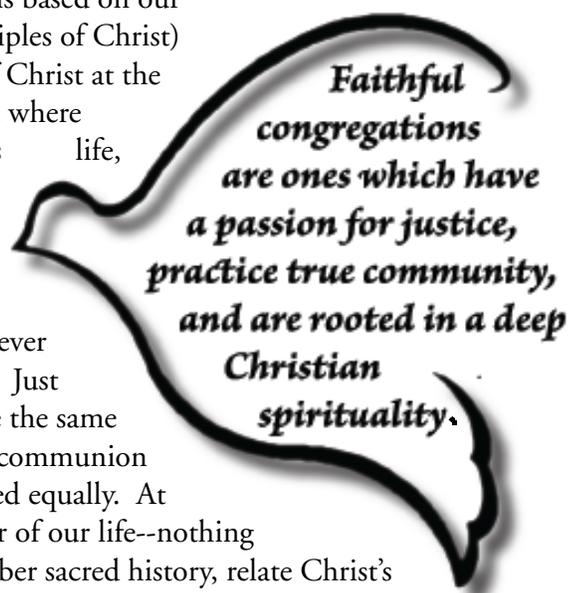
Yet, in the world we live in, cultural values and ways of structuring organizational life often overrule the values and norms of church life. Many of our churches have leaned heavily on the models of church governance and decision-making that reflect the wider culture. Robert's Rules become the order for our churches' administrative life rather than grounding our decision-making about mission and ministry in the disciplines of faith (prayer, theological reflection, Bible study, dialogue, sharing of faith experience). Churches that are faithful mission stations must have spiritual renewal as well as organizational change that allow for us to make decisions and implement those decisions in new ways.

A process of discernment is one means by which to bring spiritual and theological grounding to the administrative life of our boards and committees. As we seek to live out faithful mission, a process of discernment can focus us on the question, "What does the Lord require of us in this time and place?"

The question, "What does the Lord require?" was asked by the prophet Micah and put before his community in the Eighth Century B.C.E. His answer is quite helpful for ministry today as well. He said that God requires faithful people to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. For me, this directive translates into three specific marks of faithful congregations. Faithful congregations are ones which have a passion for justice, practice true community, and are rooted in a deep Christian spirituality. As you engage in a process of discernment, I invite you to frame your questions as matters of faithfulness. "God, is it your desire for us that we now engage in 'this kind of ministry' or 'make this decision,' 'choose this path?' 'Is this choice consistent with the marks of a faithful church?'"

The model for a discernment process described in these pages is based on our experience of communion. We in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are a People of the Table. We are people who have the table of Christ at the center of our worshiping life. We practice weekly communion where we acknowledge God's presence with us, we remember Christ's death and resurrection, and we look forward to a time when God calls us to the great banquet of life.

If we are to move together toward spiritual renewal, I believe we must carry our identity as People of the Table with us wherever we gather--not only in worship, but in board meetings as well. Just imagine the kinds of mission decisions we can make if we have the same set of core values we have when we gather at communion. At communion we have a "level playing field" where each child of God is valued equally. At communion we always acknowledge that Christ is at the center of our life--nothing more, nothing less. At communion, we hear scripture, remember sacred history, relate Christ's teaching to our lives, offer prayers for guidance, and confess our sins. At communion we celebrate the one body of Christ, trying to work together with Christ as its head.



What if our identity as People of the Table was the identity we shared in our decision-making life? I believe our mission decision would take on a new kind of strength--the strength of people gathered in true community, with deep devotion and humility before God, to claim and promote God's justice in the world.

With the framework of our call to be faithful people and our identity as Christ's gathered community, I invite you to engage in processes of discernment with the important questions of ministry, confronting your congregations.

Blessings on the journey,

Dick Hamm

General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

# Chapter 1

## Discernment in the Christian tradition

*“This is my prayer, that your love  
may overflow more and more  
with knowledge and discernment  
to help you determine what is best ...”  
Philippians 1:9-10a*

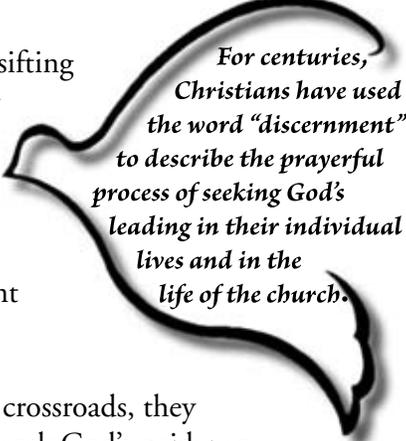
### What is discernment?

Imagine yourself looking down a road at dusk, seeing just barely the outline of an animal. Is it a deer or a dog? It's hard to tell. You look a little more carefully, trying to notice details. Are those antlers? Is that a bushy tail? In the gathering darkness you try to let your eyes adjust so you can see more clearly with the light that's available. Maybe you squint a bit, or tilt your head, or stare a little more intently until you can identify the animal's outline. Discernment, in that situation, has to do with making sense out of what you perceive.<sup>1</sup>

Or imagine yourself in a crowded room, trying to locate a friend. You might scan the crowd for the color of clothing you know your friend is wearing. Or you might look for a particular characteristic--his bald head or her red hair. In addition to using your eyes, you might try listening carefully for the sound of your friend's voice in an effort to distinguish its particular tone quality and pitch from those of all the other voices in the room. In that case, discernment has to do with separating one thing from another, setting apart the particular from the whole.<sup>2</sup>

Or perhaps, you can see yourself as a juror, asked to listen to the testimony of a witness in order to render a verdict. In that case, discernment would involve investigating with your mind and your heart all the facts that are presented so you can get at the truth of what has happened. It's a way of examining the evidence in order to arrive at a sound judgment.<sup>3</sup>

Discernment, as we use the word in our everyday language, has to do with sifting through the information we've been given in order to make sense of it. For centuries, Christians have used the word "discernment" to describe the prayerful process of seeking God's leading in their individual lives and in the life of the church. That seeking, that longing to know God's heart, points to the reality of our human condition: we can enter into the loving, creative mystery in which life is created, bathed, and nurtured; we can orient ourselves toward a hope which transcends our own vision.



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Through the ages, when followers of Jesus Christ have found themselves at crossroads, they have turned to scripture study, prayer and theological reflection in order to seek God's guidance.

Those disciplines have helped the faithful to see more clearly where and how God is at work in the world, and to discover how they can participate more fully in that work, offering healing, love and peace.

Today, the church is re-discovering the value of discernment as a practice, which can offer practical help in confusing times. It is reclaiming the discipline as a means of making personal choices and inspiring deeper faithfulness. Discernment can generate vitality and courage as we imagine, reflect and make decisions together about the future shape and direction of our common life and mission. As we work through the steps of the process, we can learn to distinguish the voice of the Holy from all the other voices which seek to influence us, so we can make sound decisions and act, as much as possible, in accordance with God's intentions. Discernment is the way we live out the prayer we pray each Sunday: "Thy will be done."

Discernment can be practiced by individuals or by groups. Frank Rogers describes the process as it takes place in community life:

*"The communal practice of discernment places group decision within the context of God's transforming activity. It trusts that resolution based on something larger than self-interest and partisanship is possible. It orients the conversation and imagination of communities toward participation in God's activity by inviting members to share in the goal of that activity: the New Creation."*<sup>4</sup>

Discernment is not meant to be a kinder, gentler political process; it is a way of life in which we try to look upon ourselves and upon our neighbors through the eyes of Love. When we enter into a process of discernment, it is for the purpose of seeing through to the essence of the matter. Discernment is a prayerful, informed, deliberate effort to distinguish the real from the phony. It is a way we uncover the path toward freedom, life and discipleship that God calls us to follow.

## Reclaiming a tradition

Discernment is not a new fad; it is an ancient practice that has its roots in the traditions of the early church. From the days of the first Jerusalem councils, the church has purposefully opened itself to the guidance of God's Spirit when confronted with difficult dilemmas. Acts 15 gives us a glimpse into one of the first occasions the church enters into a discernment process when Paul and Barnabas travel to Jerusalem in order to pose a question to the apostles and the elders of the church:

- They begin by framing the question in the context of their own ministry among Gentiles so that the gathered body can understand what is at stake in the deliberation. They ask, "Must one be circumcised according to the custom of Moses to be saved?" (verses 1-4).
- The Pharisees offer a conservative viewpoint based on tradition (verse 5).
- There is further debate (verse 6).
- Peter offers a viewpoint that contrasts with that of the Pharisees, calling the church to reflect on their own experience, and helping them to recall their mission (verse 7-11).
- Paul and Barnabas identify how they have felt God's Spirit working through them in their ministry among the Gentiles (verse 12).
- James recalls a passage from the book of Isaiah that seems to hold some relevance for the discussion at hand (verses 13-17).
- James makes a preliminary statement about what he believes God is calling the church to do (verses 19-21).
- The elders and apostles affirm and then take action on James' proposal, delivering a letter they have written to the Gentiles (verses 22-29).
- The decision is confirmed by experiences of freedom, joy and peace (verses 31-32).

As the church grew over time, men and women who chose to live in religious communities searched for ways to be faithful to the leading of the Spirit in the life of their various orders. But it was not until the 16<sup>th</sup> century that Ignatius of Loyola gave communal discernment a more structured form. In his “Rules for Discernment of Spirits,” Ignatius set out a process that could be used in Christian communities.<sup>5</sup> For Ignatius, the purpose of discernment was to enhance our participation in the work of God; it was always to be undertaken for the glory of God and the healing of the world.

Most communal discernment practices being used today follow movements of the classic Ignatian model:

### **Ignatian model**

1. Become aware of as many dimensions of the decision as possible, gathering information, considering all the possible consequences, soliciting insight, weighing the pros and cons.
2. Devote a period of time to considering the alternative the community is least inclined to choose, using the imagination to settle into that alternative, praying about it, noticing the emotions, sensations, and thoughts that either attract the group to or repel the group from the choice, reflecting on whether the sources of those various stirrings are divine, demonic, or neurotic.
3. Repeat the process for the same period of time with the other option to which the group was originally more attracted.
4. Reflect with both heart and head on the two reflective time periods, weighing information and comparing various feelings to determine which choice gave rise to a deeper sense of consolation--an experience of life, love, freedom, peace, joy, creativity and communion.
5. Make a tentative decision, living with it for a period of time in order to see if the decision is confirmed by a sense of peace through prayer.
6. If the decision seems to be confirmed, take action.

After the Reformation, other models of communal discernment evolved among Protestants. Leaders such as Luther, Calvin and Zwingli focused on scripture as the primary means by which God’s will was revealed. Later, the Society of Friends (Quakers) added their own forms to the practice of discernment as they “waited upon the Spirit.” They learned to come to consensus (making a decision everyone can live with). They created the “clearness committee” (gathering a group of trusted people together to listen and reflect with an individual who is trying to make a choice). When not everyone agreed about which direction the Spirit was leading, they discovered value in registering non-concurrence (like the Supreme Court does when they publish a minority opinion on a judgment which has been rendered).

Other Protestant groups continued making time to come together as Christians to follow the leading of the Spirit. In 1729, founders of the Methodist movement formed the Covenant Group called a “Holy Club” whose members encouraged each other in practicing the disciplines of prayer, Bible study, fasting, communion, and service. They believed that the Spirit works within each individual from the time of baptism, helping that person to grow in faith and discipleship.

Early founders of the movement that eventually became the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) emphasized the importance of the Biblical story in the discernment process. They believed the Holy Spirit to be an active agent that “subdues chaos, brings order, and vitalizes humanity,” shaping the character of Christians and helping them to come to know God more fully through the scriptures.<sup>6</sup>

According to Alexander Campbell, those who wished to discern God’s will should open the Bible with that aim as their ardent desire and sole intent. With that focus in mind, he believed that those who would go

seeking guidance would not be disappointed.<sup>7</sup>

During the last few decades, the base communities of Latin America have taught us a good deal about how a community of believers can tune their hearts to the heart of God. Leaders such as Gustavo Gutierrez have reminded us that liberative community action is an integral part of a personal life of prayer. African theologians such as Bakole Wa Ilunga, Desmond Tutu, and Zephania Kameeta have also emphasized the connection between spirituality and freedom, giving rise to indigenous expressions of Christianity empowered by experiences of God's presence. Asian writers such as Kosuke Koyama have lifted up the importance of slowing down the pace of life in order to notice the presence of the Spirit in the regularity of nature's cycles. American writers such as Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King Jr., James Cone, and Morton Kelsey have looked to the Spirit as a source of healing for personal and communal brokenness. Men and women living both inside and outside religious orders have borne witness to discernment as a tool for energizing meetings and making decisions for the common good.

## Discernment in the life of a congregation

Although the practice of discernment has taken on many different emphases throughout the centuries, all forms of discernment seem to make some underlying assumptions about God and human nature:

1. God wants to be known.
2. God is at work in the lives of individuals, in community, in the whole of creation.
3. Our abilities to perceive God at work are limited.

When we enter into the practice of discernment we are making the rather bold claim that it is actually possible to come to know something about the will of God. The Biblical story tells us how God has been engaged in self-revelation since the beginning of time, disclosing the divine intention through creation itself, through the law and the prophets, through the person of Jesus Christ, and through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The faith tradition teaches that God cares about our individual lives and the life of the church and that God continually calls us to show that same kind of care for our neighbor.

But we also claim when we pray, "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done," that we are limited in our ability to recognize God at work in the world and to listen to the voice of God in our own hearts. Because of our own humanity we can see the mystery of God only "in a mirror dimly" and can know only in part (1 Corinthians 13:12). The language of the Spirit is unfamiliar. Often, we see God's hand upon our lives only in retrospect, looking backwards from a safe place. While we're in the middle of it, the process of discernment can feel chaotic, at times nebulous. That means there will be people in every congregation who will be uncomfortable with the practice of discernment. Those who are used to business meetings which rely mostly on logic and persuasive debate, may find it especially uncomfortable to work in a mode that requires the group to attend to an insight here, a feeling there, and a sense of being on the verge of something everywhere.

Yet that is the counter-cultural character of the discernment process. It goes against the norms of individualism, competition, compartmentalization, and specialization which have become such a familiar part of our secularized culture. Instead it seeks to build community and consensus. It counters the idea that wisdom is a commodity held only by a few educated experts, affirming rather that every Christian is called to listen for the voice of the Spirit and to seek the will of God. It challenges the concept of church as a hobby, one of a number of nice community activities,<sup>8</sup> calling instead for Christians to take seriously those practices of Bible study, prayer, and reflective listening which can lead to radical transformation and singular commitment to doing God's will.

Communal discernment is not meant to be a quick or easy fix for the church's problems, but those who have participated in the practice have discovered it offers some real benefits:

- It provides opportunities for those in the congregation to share with each other about their faith.
- It helps church leaders develop new skills, especially in identifying the movements of the Spirit and in communicating with others.
- It energizes groups and makes meetings more fun.
- It allows groups to gain new insights and often to discover the nature of God's guidance on a particular issue.
- It strengthens the congregation's understanding of itself as Christ's body.
- It allows congregations to make fewer, well-thought-out decisions that last, and to avoid revisiting the same issues over and over again.

Although there should be specific time set aside for moving through the steps of discernment, the practice always happens within the context of the church's ongoing ministry. Discernment does not take place in crowds of strangers. It occurs within communities committed to putting God first, who gather on a regular basis to worship, to learn, and to serve, carrying out a specific ongoing mission together. The integrity of the discernment process is rooted in the quality of the ongoing interactions in the congregation's daily life.

## Questions for discussion

1. What are some characteristics of the practice of discernment?
2. When have you sought God's leading in your own life? Which aspects of the practice of discernment were parts of your experience?
3. What might be some benefits of the practice of discernment for your own congregation? What might be some of the drawbacks?

## Chapter 2

# Discernment in congregational life

*Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way  
into him who is the head, into Christ  
from whom the whole body, joined and knit together  
by every ligament with which it is equipped,  
as each part is working properly,  
promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.  
Ephesians 4:15-16*

### A climate for discernment

Discernment does not take place in a vacuum; it's always part of the larger context of congregational life. If the relationships, expectations, and procedures present in the church create a supportive climate for its practice, then discernment can thrive; if attitudes, interactions and the style of doing business in the congregation work against it, then no amount of exhortation will cause the discernment process to take root. Congregations who are ready to enter into a discernment process are not churches experiencing intense conflict. They are healthy, functional communities who enjoy being together, who have fun, who do and say things to build up the church, and who act in faith to accomplish God's mission in the world.

Often, congregations who want to incorporate the discernment process into their life and work already have learned to make prayer an integral part of their administrative life. Some even may have come to appreciate a style of decision-making in which story-telling, Bible study, singing, silence, contemplation and consensus-building make up the fabric of any church meeting.<sup>9</sup> Congregations who are comfortable with such a model of "worshipful work" may find it easier to include discernment as the more formalized discipline designed to address particular, significant questions in the life of the church since both processes require some of the same skills and attitudes.

It is important for church leaders concerned with discernment to cultivate a relationship with the Holy through daily meditation and prayer if they are to help equip others to discern the Spirit's leading in the midst of a community. The integrity of the discernment process, in fact, may depend upon the integrity of its leaders. Pastors, elders and members of official boards must be committed to rooting and grounding themselves in the heart of God through their own spiritual practice before discernment in the life of the congregation can be effective.

In establishing a climate conducive to discernment in the church community, it's also helpful if there are some members of the church who actually have used the Ignatian Model (or some other specific form of discernment) in making individual decisions. Sharing such experiences in small groups can encourage others to engage in the process when making major choices in their own lives and it can help others value the skills and attitudes which are important to discernment in the life of the church.

The practice of discernment cannot be separated from the ongoing discipline of spiritual formation through worship, education and prayer. To discern God's leading when we are faced with a specific dilemma, we must have in place a deep sensitivity to the ways and being of God. We cannot simply follow a set of sequential steps to reach a logical conclusion. Discernment and faith development must go hand in hand. The ability to discern comes from living life in the Spirit. It is a process of growth. As we come to dwell in Christ more and more, we can develop a deeper capacity for determining whether various impulses move us toward or away from God's work in the world.

## **When should a congregation enter into discernment?**

The practice of discernment takes time. That means it's simply impractical to utilize the process to make all the decisions that face a church in any given year. Over a twelve-month period, congregations generally enter into discernment concerning only one significant issue, or at the most two that are central to the church's life and mission. During a year when a congregation is involved in major projects that require an unusual amount of time and energy, they may decide not to engage in a discernment process at all.

Discernment always considers a question about what a group should DO, not about what it should BELIEVE. As a practice, discernment is simply an inappropriate tool for settling theological differences. Although distinct understandings of faith will most likely be part of any sharing which takes place during the process, decisions that grow out of discernment will not be expressed merely in words, but in actions which the group undertakes in response to God's call and the guidance of Holy Spirit.

A congregation usually enters into discernment when it's faced with a significant choice. (The presence of a new reality confronting the church may itself be an action of the Spirit, calling the congregation to set aside its fears in order to trust God more fully!) The process often takes three to 12 months. It is not meant to be expedient but effective, producing a decision that is embraced by the church and motivates the congregation to creatively act. A congregation might enter into discernment in situations such as these:

- There is a change in pastoral leadership.
- A new member or new group of members brings new gifts into the church.
- There is a major change in the neighborhood around the church.
- There is an event in the community or in the life of the church which invites a response.
- A particular scripture passage speaks to one or more people in a church, nudging them to ask a new question.
- The congregation is ready to take on a new challenge.
- One or more church members are moved by a story of someone else's need.

Discernment is not the same as futuring, but sometimes a congregation who is writing a mission statement or engaging in long-range planning may find the discernment process helpful for certain specific questions which present themselves when considering the future. The practice of discernment can clarify the focus of a church's mission. It can help a congregation focus its ministry when there are too many options. It can aid a congregation in determining whether to create a new staff position or not and in identifying what gifts are needed should a new position be established. It can help a church determine how its resources should be used.

## Who should practice discernment on behalf of the church?

Which group in the church should be assigned the task of discernment is up to each individual congregation. Often it is the official board who sets aside time for discernment alongside its other business, dedicating certain meetings to the practice, going away on retreat for an extended period of time, or inviting one of the elders to come in and lead the process for one hour of each meeting's agenda. Sometimes it is the eldership itself who will be given the task of discerning on behalf of the church what to do about a certain matter. Sometimes it is a special group which is called out from the congregation to spend time focusing on the issue for discernment, working independently, yet committed to keeping the larger community informed about what they are doing.

Usually, there is interplay between several groups in the church when a congregation enters into discernment. A small group of five to 12 people may do the actual discernment work, but may choose to broaden their perspective by including other groups in the church or even the whole congregation in gathering information or soliciting stories.

Certainly, it is important for the congregation to be informed about the progress of the discernment process as it goes along. As a smaller group begins the practice, they might encourage wider commitment by inviting the congregation to participate in a church-wide prayer vigil or to form prayer groups to specifically pray for those involved in discernment. A large piece of paper with the question for discernment written on it might be torn into pieces so that each member of the church can take one home as a reminder to pray for the process. A symbol representing the issue facing the discernment group might be prominently displayed in the sanctuary to help the congregation to be mindful of the need to pray daily for God's guidance. As the discernment process concludes, something might be added to the symbol to celebrate the decision which has been made. Members of the congregation may be invited to bring back the pieces of the question they have been praying with and reconnect them. The decision may be shared with the congregation through a number of five-minute "spotlights" during the worship service, or through visits to other small groups within the church, or through a simple ten minute video which could be distributed to each household of the congregation.<sup>10</sup>

No matter what configuration is used or how information is shared with the congregation, those who enter into an intentional process of discernment on behalf of the church should be willing to

- Seek God's intention for the church with earnestness.
- Cultivate an attitude of humility which recognizes our human limitations and sinfulness.
- Pray patiently regarding the issue at hand.
- Attend actively to each person's words, feelings and non-verbal expressions in the spirit of genuine caring.
- Recognize and release preconceived perceptions.
- Open the heart and mind to new insights, feelings and points of view.
- Take responsibility for one's own feelings, words, and actions as an individual member of Christ's body.

## Are we ready to practice discernment?

Those choosing to enter into intentional discernment discover there are certain readiness factors which, when present in the life of the congregation, aid the church in walking through the process. Those who are prepared to enter into discernment could describe themselves this way:

We are a congregation who:

- Participates in worship with the expectation that God will be encountered there. We do not perform religious rituals week after week with little or no anticipation that they will transform lives.
- Focuses outwardly, responding because of a genuine desire to serve others. We do not become preoccupied with the need for institutional survival.
- Commits itself with passion, to doing the work of Christ. We do not get bogged down in disheartened apathy.
- Gives thanks for congregational strengths. We do not focus on congregational inadequacies.
- Trusts and celebrates the strong leadership of the pastor and the elected lay leaders, who point to God instead of to themselves, who persevere in the face of adversity, who practice prayer, who work hard, who empower others to use their gifts, who can articulate the church's mission and act with the best interests of the church at heart. We do not feel the need to watch-dog our leaders' every move.
- Holds a clear hopeful vision for the future, that can be communicated in simple language. We do not look to a vague purpose which is too general or too complicated to give the church direction.
- Grounds its ongoing business in spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, scripture reading, worship, discernment, and stewardship. We do not depend solely on secular practices to guide the church in its governance.
- Offers warm, genuine caring to those in need, while accepting and loving people for who they are. We do not create an atmosphere where they feel as they must censure themselves in order to belong.
- Goes out of its way to welcome outsiders and strangers, giving them the information they need to be able to participate with ease. We do not carry on traditions that may be meaningful for long-term members but exclude the stranger.
- Organizes itself in a streamlined structure, that can be responsive to changing needs. We do not tie up decisions in bureaucratic red tape that does not allow for flexibility.
- Takes risks, and assumes that some endeavors will fail. We do not always play it safe with the goal of succeeding at everything.

## Questions for Discussion

1. What are some aspects of your congregation's life which would help create a hospitable climate for the practice of discernment to take root? Which aspects might hinder its growth?
2. Who might practice discernment on behalf of the congregation? Why?
3. In what specific ways might a group practicing discernment in your congregation communicate with the rest of the church?
4. How would you assess your congregation's health and readiness to practice discernment in light of the criteria on page 10?

## Chapter 3

# In communion

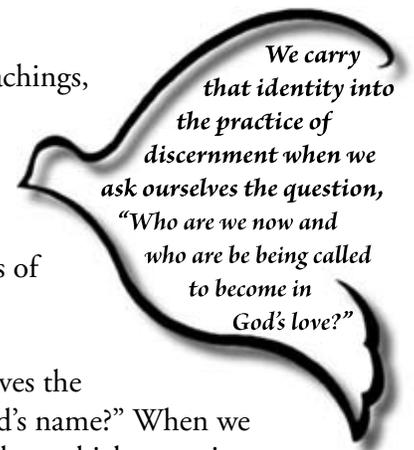
*Because there is one bread,  
we who are many are one body,  
for we all partake of the one bread.  
1 Corinthians 10:17*

## The center of congregational life

Every Sunday, Disciples of Christ congregations celebrate the Lord's Supper. The communion table is a symbolic center for our congregational life. Many of us say the experience of communion with God in the worshipping community is vital for our spiritual health, well-being, and growth. As we look at the meaning of that meal, we can deepen our understanding of what it means to be "in communion" with others, whether it's at the table of the Lord or at the table of the board. We can begin to see how Christ is present with us as we break bread, as we break open the scriptures, as we break open our lives to each other, prayerfully seeking God's guidance in the questions and issues that arise as part of our congregational life.

## We remember

At the Lord's Supper, we are empowered by the memory of Christ's life, teachings, work, death and resurrection. Each week, as we gather around the table, we remind ourselves of the story that is central to our life as Christians. Remembering has a powerful affect on us. It shapes who we are, reminding us of our deepest commitment and highest loyalty. It roots us in our history and purpose for being. It gives us our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ.



We carry that identity into the practice of discernment when we ask ourselves the question, "Who are we now and who are we being called to become in God's name?" When we recollect our story, we remember we are a people being called to live out values which sometimes contrast sharply with the ways of the world. We focus on our tradition which calls us to be servants, seeking to be of the same mind as Christ "who though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself" (Philippians 2:6-7a). We focus on our identity as a people who seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness (Matthew 6:33).

In that sense then, remembering does not just have to do with the past; it is the catalyst that propels us forward into the future. It inspires us to care for the legacy we have been given, encouraging us always to deeper trust, finer commitment. It reminds us that we live in covenant with God and with one another. That covenant is defined by love and holds no room for mistrust, injustice, arrogance, greed or idolatry.

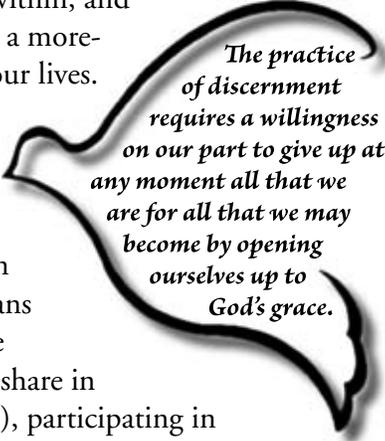
### **One congregation...**

*situated in a poor suburban neighborhood began to live out its identity as Christ's servants in a new way just a few years ago. The church was declining in numbers and most of those who showed up for worship on Sunday were more than 60 years old. But then something unusual began to happen. Youngsters from the neighborhood began coming to church without their parents and the congregation was forced to wonder what they could do. The congregation hadn't had a Sunday school in years, but one of the older women who used to teach volunteered to start a class. Some of the other older adults took it upon themselves to sit with the children in church, to get to know them, and to establish a kind of surrogate-grandparent relationship. After discovering that most of the children qualified for free breakfasts and lunches at school during the week, another group of adults began cooking for them on Sunday morning so they would have something to eat on that day too. Now, more than 60 children show up each week for breakfast, Sunday School, and worship, all because the congregation claimed its identity, not as an institution which must survive, but as a vehicle of God's love for those in need.*

It calls us to live in mutual concern, valuing each other's stories and experiences, and honoring each other's gifts. That mutual concern is not born out of our need to be "nice" or to maintain a comfortable harmony in a group; it grows out of our commitment to live out the reality of our partnership in Christ's service.

## **We participate in Christ's body**

As we partake of the bread and the cup in our worship, we are sustained by God's love and presence among us. We remember that Christ has not left us orphaned (John 14:18) but has fulfilled his promise to be with us through the Spirit of truth who abides with us and in us (John 14:17). When we are aware of taking that Spirit with us into the daily life of our congregation, then we know that Christ is present among and within us whenever we gather together. Each individual can share a piece of the Spirit's truth which dwells within, and that wisdom can be collected-up to give a more-complete image of God's intention for our lives. Yet, to share that wisdom, we must be willing to allow our selfishness to die in order for God to be able to work through us. We must be willing to consider ourselves "dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:11). As we bless the cup and break the bread at the Lord's Table each week, we share in the body of Christ (I Corinthians 10:16), participating in Christ's death and resurrection, renewing our commitment to walk in the newness of life (Romans 6:4) and in the freedom of the Spirit (Romans 8:2). We set our minds on the things of the Spirit in order to live in life and peace (Romans 8:6).



*The practice of discernment requires a willingness on our part to give up at any moment all that we are for all that we may become by opening ourselves up to God's grace.*

The practice of discernment requires a willingness on our part to give up at any moment all that we are for all that we may become by opening ourselves up to God's grace. Group discernment invites a kind of conversion of the collective heart of the church. As we come to the Lord's table week after week, we seek to be nourished so that we may move beyond our own selfish motives, maturing in the fullness of Christ with the honesty to ask, "Are we willing to let ourselves be shaped as a community of faith by wholly seeking God's intention for our congregation?"

In communion, the bread and the cup are our food, a source of sustenance which can help us grow in our willingness to live life in the Spirit. As we deepen our trust in the Holy, we discover that the practice of discernment is not so much a game of hide-and-seek where we try to find some secret, objective plan God might have for our future; it is a submission to become more Christ-like each day, allowing

ourselves to be transformed so we can recognize how our decisions can most fully support God's work of healing, reconciliation, justice, love, peace, joy, freedom, and integrity for the whole creation. We come to the communion table, in part, to keep us faithful to that vision and to remind ourselves that our work is not our own: it comes to us at Christ's initiative and bidding.

## We show our oneness

Communion can be deeply personal, but it is never private. We feast at the Lord's table with our neighbors, both those we can see in the pew beside us and those we cannot see who are part of the worldwide body of the church transcending time and place. As we share in the body and blood of Christ at the Lord's Supper,

***In one county seat town, a modest transformation took place in the congregation when the teenagers in the church led worship in celebration of Earth Day. They projected pictures on the sanctuary wall depicting all the things we love about our planet and read scriptures about the wonder of creation. Then they began to share statistics about the amount of garbage people generate. After worship, the congregation encountered a very large pile of trash in the fellowship hall that was generated from a month's worth of coffee times. They got the point. One couple in the church constructed a rack big enough to hold ceramic mugs for everyone in the congregation plus a few extras for guests. Much of the trash was eliminated because a small conversion had taken place in the church community.***

we bind ourselves to Christ and to one another. We recognize that we can no longer live simply as individuals who are free to "do our own thing;" we are committed to act responsibly, knowing that we are accountable to our brothers and sisters and to the law of love. We are interdependent creatures; our decisions affect the whole. That means that bullying others to get our own way is simply inappropriate in the life of the church. Manipulating others for the sake of personal gain or power is contrary to the nature of the communion we share.

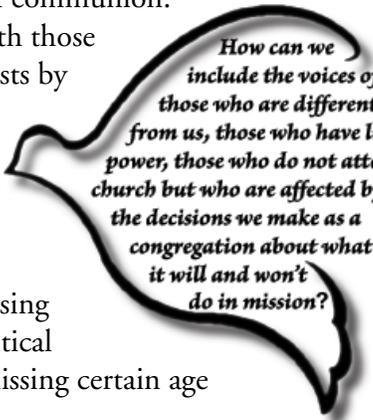
No one person understands the whole of God's character or vision. That's why the gifts and graces of so many people must contribute to the practice of discernment. The unique events of our individual stories, the particular way we understand God's word in scripture, the varied remembrances of the church's history, together with the power of intentional prayer offer distinct insights into how a congregation might decide and act in accordance with God's will.

The communion table is a symbol of our unity as the Body of Christ. It reminds us that we are people bound in covenant to one another and to Christ. When we recognize and live out of this covenant then we find that the church is strong enough to sustain difference of opinion and variation of thought. In fact, it is only when we allow our diversity to surface, when we honor that diversity by treating each other with mutual respect and trust, that our unity can have the kind of integrity which makes it a powerful witness in the world.

In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) we invite anyone who professes to be a Christian to partake of communion.

We look to Jesus who ate and drank with those who would have been considered outcasts by their culture; especially the poor, the oppressed, the outsiders, and we know all are welcomed at Christ's table. Yet, in reality, we know people

are missing from the banquet feast. Our faith communities do not reflect the diverse nature of the whole human family. Some congregations are missing people of other ethnic backgrounds. Some are missing people of other political persuasions. Some are missing those who live in poverty. Still others are missing certain age



How can we include the voices of those who are different from us, those who have little power, those who do not attend church but who are affected by the decisions we make as a congregation about what it will and won't do in mission?

### ***One congregation in***

a small farming community learned to enlarge its table. For years, there had been an unspoken division between those who lived in the town and those who lived in the trailer court at the edge of town. The division reflected a separation between the educated and the non-educated, between the haves and the have-nots, between the socially graced and those who didn't always know how to act when they gathered with others in a public setting. But then the town was flooded and both groups found themselves working side by side. First they sandbagged, then they dug out, then they cleaned up the mess left by the mud and the water in both the trailer court and the town. For the first time, members of the church who hardly ever spoke to each other under normal circumstances found themselves commiserating about a common problem in their town. It took a little time and a lot of cups of coffee before real relationships were forged between the two groups, and bridges were built between people. Of course, class distinctions were never totally erased, but the church was able to unite in order to help all their neighbors who needed assistance in reclaiming their homes.

groups. How can we offer hospitality to those on the margins? How can we welcome others as Christ has welcomed us (Romans 15:7)?

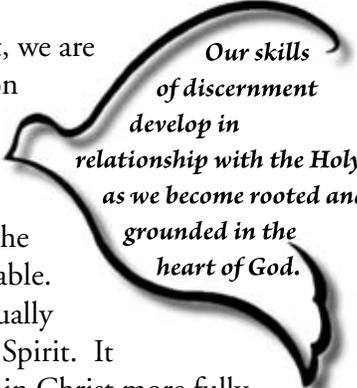
In the practice of discernment, we find ourselves confronted by those same questions. How can we include the voices of those who are different from us, those who have little power, those who do not attend church but who are affected by the decisions we make as a congregation about what it will and won't do in mission? To gain the fullest perspective on God's will for the church, it is important for the church to embody the diversity of the human family with regard to age, income, education, gender, race or any other apparent difference. That means, if we can see someone is missing from the table, we may need to make an intentional effort to pull up an extra chair, to invite another voice to join in the conversation, to listen to another's stories, to invite another's input as an equal partner in the pursuit of God's intention for our congregation.

Yet, for such partnerships to hold integrity, we must recognize the need to reconcile the imbalance of power which has excluded others in the past. The truth is, we have limited the seating, keeping some from having a voice at Christ's table. It takes a good deal of humility to confess our complicity, intentional or not, in such exclusionary actions, yet if we want to fully commune with our brothers and sisters in order to gain the fullest understanding of God's revelation, then we must do what is necessary to ask each other's forgiveness before we can enter into the practice of discernment as equals.

## **We taste God's new creation**

As we come to the Table of the Lord, we are aware that more is going on than meets the eye. Each Sunday, as we hold in our hands little bits of bread and juice, we know we are being treated to a taste of the joyful feast of the people of God, the holy supper in God's new creation. We are nourished by the hope of God's promised Kingdom which will come in all its fullness at the end of time. We are spiritually fed at the great banquet of life so we can be renewed in Christ's service, leaving the table with a new sense of direction and purpose, recommitted to do what God is calling us to do.

So too, through the practice of discernment, we are empowered to act. We receive a clearer vision of how we can participate in the Spirit's work. We act in freedom, making specific decisions which will help us love God and our neighbor more fully. But it is not only the end-product which makes discernment valuable. Each time we enter into the practice, we actually embody a bit of what it means to live in the Spirit. It is a process of growth. As we come to dwell in Christ more fully,



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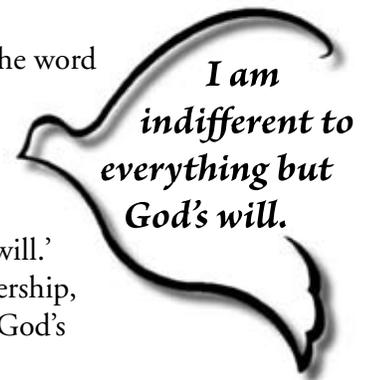
we can develop a deeper capacity for determining whether various impulses move us toward or away from God. The ability to discern is dynamic. The more we practice, the more we grow in our ability to engage the practice in creative and faithful ways. Our skills of discernment develop in relationship with the Holy as we become rooted and grounded in the heart of God.

What are those skills which enable us to see more clearly the leading of the Spirit? Here are some which have been associated with the practice through the centuries.

## Discernment skills

### Indifference

In Discerning God's Will Together the principle of indifference is described: "The word indifference is usually thought to be a negative word. To say 'I am indifferent' means 'I am not interested' or 'I don't care,' or 'count me out.' As a principle of discernment, indifference is a positive word, deep in meaning and rich in the Christian tradition. To say 'I am indifferent' does not mean 'I don't care,' but rather 'I don't value anything as much as I value knowing and doing God's will.' It means that I am indifferent to matters of ego, prestige, politics, personal ownership, pride, favor, comfort, advantage, and so on. I am indifferent to everything but God's will."<sup>11</sup>



### Biblical literacy

As we tell the stories of our faith and share scriptures which have been important in shaping us, we grow in our knowledge of the Bible. We become familiar with the characters we meet on its pages. We grow in our ability to call to mind passages that may have some bearing on a certain issue, not proof-texting, but expanding our understanding of the question before us in all its aspects. The more members of the group who are familiar with the Bible, the more God can speak through scripture to those assembled.

### Speaking the truth in love

Telling the truth about what we know through our own experience is a skill that requires trust. Trust is built as we receive the truth of others in an attitude of acceptance rather than of criticism. As we develop our capacity to stand truthfully before God (confession), we enlarge our capacity for receiving God's grace. As we listen to what is true for others, we can broaden our experience and grow.

### Consolation

As we make choices in accordance with God's intentions, we feel consolation which may be characterized by:

- A deep interior joy that is unselfconscious and uninhibited.
- A temporary experience of disorientation followed by calm and serenity.
- Tears that are comforting and tranquilizing rather than disturbing and fatiguing.
- A sudden sense of clarity.
- A convergence of unrelated strands of experience which now begin to make sense.
- There is persistent confirmation that this is the "right" choice.
- A lasting sense of peace which is not caused merely by bringing closure to crisis of indecision, or by escaping an unhappy situation, or by denying a painful reality.<sup>12</sup>

### ***A youth group used their***

church's labyrinth for discerning God's leading regarding what they should plan for Youth Sunday worship, when they were to provide all the leadership, focus, theme and liturgy.

First, a leader provided a simple introduction to the labyrinth as a tool for contemplation, listening prayer, awareness in silence, a place to notice God's holy, guiding presence in their lives. The youth were then given an assignment:

*"As you walk, notice what is going on in your heart, your mind, your body, your spirit."*

They were also told about paper and pencils that were provided, and waiting on several tables outside the labyrinth, for the youth to pick up AFTER they were each done walking so they could journal their thoughts and feelings, and also wait thoughtfully if others were still walking.

Then the youth were facilitated to walk the labyrinth, with an initial minute of silence and then a half minute or so between each who entered the labyrinth.

When all were done walking, and after each had the opportunity to journal their thoughts, they were invited to gather in the center of the labyrinth for a time of sharing their insights.

The youth were invited to respond to questions that included:

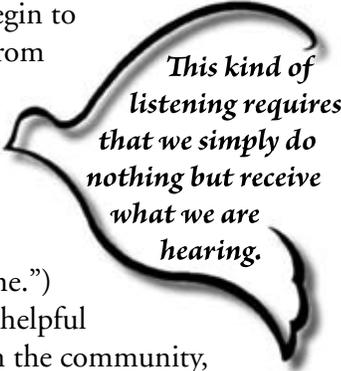
- What did you notice?
- What did you notice within you?
- What did you notice around you?
- What did you feel?
- What did you think about?
- What does any of this suggest is important for the work that is ahead of us [regarding what we plan for Youth Sunday]?
- How do we begin to put these thoughts into our plans and actions?

## **Noticing**

To notice what is happening around us is simply to observe it with wonder and curiosity, withholding judgment, being descriptive rather than evaluative. In noticing, we pay particular attention when we begin to see or hear messages coming to us from

various sources about one certain theme. ("Hmmm ... today in a conversation with my friend, in the morning comic strip, and in that hymn we sang in worship I seemed to be hearing the same theme.")

In the practice of discernment, it is helpful to notice such things as the needs in the community, the dynamics of the group, the personal internal feelings or nudging we experience which seem to call us in a particular direction.



*This kind of listening requires that we simply do nothing but receive what we are hearing.*

## **Contemplative listening**

This kind of listening requires that we simply do nothing but receive what we are hearing. We can listen contemplatively to God in prayer or we can listen contemplatively to another person in a discernment group, noticing the tone of voice and body movements and attending to the spoken words without evaluation or judgment. Here are some guidelines for how to listen contemplatively:

- Take time to become settled in God's presence.
- Listen with your entire self (your senses, feeling intuition and rational faculties).
- Do not challenge what others say.
- Do not interrupt.
- Do not formulate what you want to say while someone else is speaking.
- When someone has finished speaking, respond only by asking questions for clarification or by noticing.
- Pause between speakers to absorb what has been said.

## **Silence**

Silence is an important part of any discernment process. Groups who have had little experience with silence may find it uncomfortable at first. (We rarely experience true silence in our busy world!) But as we practice, we can build up a tolerance for a length of silence in which we can quiet our minds in order to attend to God's voice in our hearts.

As we practice the skills of discernment together, we renew our covenant with one another and with God whose will we seek. We grow in our capacity to discern the movements of the Spirit

among us. We learn to take the circumstances we are handed, to bless them, to break them open, viewing them from all sides and placing them in dialogue with other important stories and experiences, and then to receive God's guidance as a community in communion with one another and with the holy presence of Christ.

## Questions for Discussion

1. How has a memory of the past helped you come to know who you are and what you stand for as a congregation?
2. What does it mean to be a "covenant community?" Why is it necessary for a congregation to understand itself as a covenant community in order to engage in the practice of discernment?
3. Who's missing from the table in your congregation? How might you invite their voices to inform your mission as a church?
4. What signs of God's new creation do you see in your congregation's life and work?



## Luke 24: 13-35

(from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible)

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

And he said to them, *“What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?”*

They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, *“Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?”*

He asked them, *“What things?”*

They replied, *“The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.”*

*“Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.”*

Then he said to them, *“Oh how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?”* Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, *“Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.”* So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, *“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road while he was opening the scriptures to us?”*

That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, *“The Lord has risen indeed and he has appeared to Simon!”* Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

## Chapter 4

# Take, break, receive: The steps of discernment

*When he was at the table with them,  
he took bread,  
blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.  
Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.  
Luke 24: 30a*

This section draws from the work of Danny Morris and Chuck Olsen. In *Discerning God's Will Together*, a 10-step process for both personal and communal discernment is offered. Chuck Olsen heads an organization called "Worshipful-Work" which provides training in using this process (See suggested resources, page 52, for information on "Worshipful-Work"). This section also draws from a work by James Loder, *The Transforming Moment*.<sup>13</sup>

The ten steps outlined by Olsen and Morris have been condensed into five Movements, using images from the Story of the Emmaus Road, found in the 24<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Gospel of Luke.

### **Movement one: Engaging Christ**

It's Easter evening when we meet the two disciples walking along the road to Emmaus. Their expectations have been dashed. They had hoped Jesus was the one to redeem Israel, but their hopes have not been realized. Jesus has been crucified. A new reality has broken into their lives which stands in opposition to what they assumed to be true. Now, they're feeling restless and sad. As they trudge along, they mull over the events of the last week, trying to make some sense of it all. Their unspoken question in the face of their new circumstances is, "What now?"

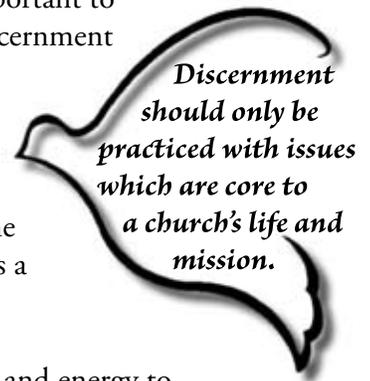
Often, it is when our assumptions are challenged or a new event breaks into our experience that we begin to ask that question too. A pastor leaves, the character of the neighborhood around the church changes, the board celebrates the completion of a five-year plan, a family with a deaf son shows up in worship and, all of a sudden, a congregation discovers it is being called to do something about the new challenges it's facing. But what?

Because the church is a covenantal community of faith, we don't just look to our own interests in answering that question. We seek out God's guidance through the leading of the Holy Spirit to determine how we will act in response to our new reality. That's where the practice of discernment can be of help. The process requires the kind of leader described on pp. 36-37.

To begin, we take what we have been given and try to describe the question which is confronting us. We frame the issue at hand using simple specific language:

- “God, what kind of pastoral staff configuration will best help us meet the needs of the growing number of young children from the neighborhood coming to church without their parents?”
- “God, is this a time for our congregation to relocate?”
- “God, are you calling us to start a new ministry with children whose mothers are in prison?”

After the question is stated to the satisfaction of the whole group, then it is important to ask, “Is this a question which deserves the time and prayerful intention of a discernment process?” Discernment should only be practiced with issues which are core to church’s life and mission. It should not be utilized with questions which are routine or peripheral to the church’s business. “God, are you calling this congregation to start a tutoring program for children?” is an example of a missional question which could be worthy of the effort to address it through the discernment process; “What color shall we choose for the new parlor carpet?” is a peripheral question which is not appropriate as an issue for discernment.



If the group decides that an issue is significant enough for them to devote time and energy to entering into discernment about it, their next step is to try grounding that question in some principles which reflect the core values of the congregation’s life. Often, such principles will already be written down in the church’s mission statement so they simply can be called to mind. Where there is no mission statement, or where the mission statement is too broad, the group will need to name those principles in order to set the boundaries for the discernment process.

For example, if the question is, “God, are you calling us to remodel our sanctuary?” the group may name these as the grounding principles which will set the framework for the decision that they eventually will make:

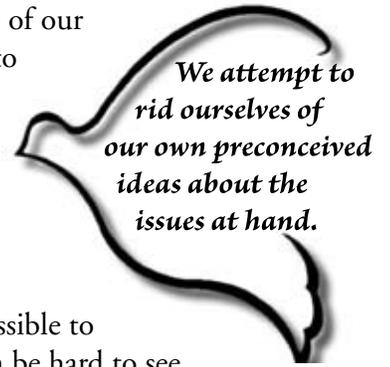
- “We hold to the idea that worship must focus on God and not on ourselves.”
- “As a congregation, we value the principles of hospitality and community.”
- “We believe we are called to be good stewards of the financial resources we have been given.”

As a ship trying to navigate its way through a difficult channel relies on buoy markers to keep it on course, the core values named by the group can help it stay focused on the important aspects of the discernment process. When the group has made a choice about how it will act in response to God’s call, it will be helpful to test the decision, making sure it does not violate the principles the group named during this movement.

## **Movement two: Emptying ourselves**

Clearly, the two travelers to Emmaus have been humbled by their experience in Jerusalem. They had anticipated that Jesus would be the one who would come to power as the Messiah and that he would save his people. Perhaps they had even been in that Palm Sunday crowd greeting him with shouts of “Hosanna!” But the events of the week had taken a different turn. Now, they find themselves confused and wondering. They can reel off the facts of what happened to Jesus, how he’d been handed over, condemned and crucified, but they are dependent upon the stranger to help them make sense of what’s taken place. “Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” he asks them. Then, beginning with Moses and all the prophets he begins to interpret what it all means.

In this movement, we too recognize our limitations in understanding the events in our lives, and we declare our dependence on God's leading. We attempt to rid ourselves of our own preconceived ideas about the issue at hand. We try to lay aside the need to control the outcome of the discernment process. We make an effort to name anything which might keep members of the group from opening up their hearts and inviting God's Spirit to dwell there. We seek God's intention with our whole being, and commit ourselves to following God's will, even before we know what it is.



To open our hearts to God in this way is not easy. Sometimes it's nearly impossible to identify our own pre-judgments; when we've lived with them so long, they can be hard to see. Sometimes, it's difficult to give up cherished beliefs, even when we know they must die in order to make room for God's new gifts in our lives. Sometimes, we simply succumb to sin, giving in to the pressure to conform to the values of the society around us: efficiency, expediency, harmony at any cost, personal gain, or concern about what other people will think.

From the earliest days of Judaism and Christianity, the faith community has recognized the dangers associated with trying to listen and respond to God's guidance. "The Hebrew people had to distinguish time and again between true and false prophets (for example, Jeremiah 28:1-16). Likewise, the early church was admonished to test every spirit." (1 John 4:1, 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21).<sup>14</sup> We don't have to look any farther than the cults of Jonestown and Heaven's Gate to remind ourselves that the history of the church is littered with stories of people who have claimed guidance from the Spirit when it was really the prejudices of self-deception which were at work.

So, the first step in this movement is for members of the group to become still within so we may reflect honestly about our willingness to give up our own desires for the sake of discerning God's desires. It requires humility to identify the obstacles which keep us from fully opening our hearts to God's intentions, yet confessing such blockages is essential to the practice of discernment. Even one person can sabotage the process if he or she holds on to motivations other than the ultimate one of knowing God's will.

A group which is serious about seeking God's intention for their life together must be willing to ask: What do we need to lay aside or leave behind so we will be open to new gifts of grace or new expressions of ministry? After the group has identified those attitudes, ideas, and past experiences which might block them in seeking God's will, it can be helpful to confess them through a prayer, a song, or a ritual designed to help let them go. (See The Leader's Toolbox page 29 for suggestions.)

Then, it is appropriate for the leader to simply test where the group is by asking, "How ready are we to completely open our hearts to God's will?" It is not a question for a vote; it is simply a way of encouraging group members to examine their hearts and then report one by one to the group how they are honestly feeling:

- "Yes, I think I can sincerely open myself to God's intention."
- "I want to be indifferent to everything but God's will, but I have had lot invested in this issue in the past. I am still struggling to let go of my own desires."

As each person shares, it is important for the rest of the group to simply listen without passing judgment or offering solutions.

When everyone has had a chance to report how open they believe they can be, the leader may choose to make a summary statement of where the group is as a whole:

- "It sounds like we have opened our hearts to God and that we're ready to proceed."

- “It sounds like we have opened our hearts to God as much as we can at this moment. We know there are still barriers for some of us, they don’t seem to be so profound that we can’t proceed with the intent of growing in our willingness to set aside our own desires as we move through the process.”
- “It sounds like we are unable, at this point, to sincerely open ourselves up to God’s intention for our group, so I believe we should wait awhile before entering into a process of discernment on this issue.”

Moving forward in the process when there is not a genuine, unanimous commitment to seeking God’s will as the primary focus of the group should be done with strong caution in an attitude of humility.

## Movement three: Encountering our past and present

When the stranger on the road talks with the two travelers on the road to Emmaus, he helps them understand how God is at work in the world by intertwining stories of Moses and the prophets from their tradition with the story about himself. Later, when they look back on that time of learning, they remember how their hearts had burned as he opened the scriptures to them.

Our stories can be an important way for God to speak to us. They help us to see wisdom and to recognize truth by giving us specific, concrete examples. They connect our personal stories with the larger stories of humankind, thereby broadening our experience and vision. They open us to new ideas by catching us off guard, surprising us with twists of plot and creativity of language.

In the discernment process, stories shared with the group can come from the Bible, from the tradition of the church, from the history of the congregation, and from the personal experiences of those inside and outside the group. Sometimes they are selected before a meeting as a leader considers the topic at hand. Sometimes they simply “come to mind” during the group’s discussion. Either way, the choice of which stories will be told can be, in and of itself, the guidance of God if those in the group are attuned to the promptings of the Spirit rather than to their own desire to make a point or to get attention.

Often a group discovers that the discernment process needs to be informed by stories from voices outside their group. Then, they may choose to bring in someone to tell that story or they may decide to put the story in front of the group in printed form from a written resource. For example, a church seeking to answer the question, “How can we be more responsive to the needs of single parents in our neighborhood?” begins to talk about who will be affected by its decision. That leads the congregation to interview several single parents who live near the church, and to read an article together about what it’s like to raise children without a partner.

Regardless of which stories are told, how they are selected, or who tells them, there is a way of listening to the stories which is important to the discernment process:

- *A story is shared followed by silence;*
- *After the silence, those in the group may comment one by one on what wisdom they gleaned from the story—the way it spoke to them. They must speak only for themselves;*
- *There is more silence after each speaker’s response. Members of the group should refrain from reacting to the responses others make; and*
- *When each person who wants to share the wisdom he or she has gleaned from the story has done so, then the leader may invite the group to notice any common threads they have heard in the comments.*

There is a contemplative mood to this kind of sharing which makes it different from a dialogue, debate, or discussion.

## Movement four: Examining new possibilities

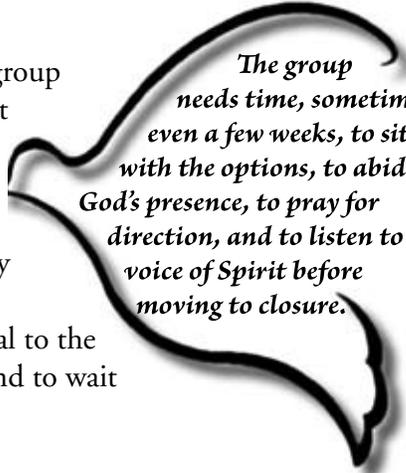
In the presence of Jesus, the two who are walking to Emmaus discover a new way of looking at their situation. They see new possibilities that eventually lead them to act. In Luke's story, they do not debate with Jesus or evaluate his ideas, they simply listen to him. We get the impression that their posture is one of relaxed concentration. When they get to the village, they invite Jesus to abide with them.

When we come to this movement in the discernment process, we also ask the presence of Christ to be with us in a particular way, guiding our thinking, showing us new ways of looking at the issue at hand. Exploring the possibilities is done in a free-flowing, expansive manner. To enter into this part of the process, the group should simply brainstorm answers to the question: "What are the options available to us which honor the guiding principles we established at the beginning of the process?" As ideas are shared, they are written down where everyone can see them, but there should be no judgments and no debate about them at this point. The goal is to identify all possible actions that could be taken. The group should feel free to be creative and free-wheeling in their exploration.

After the group believes that they have named the options, they are given a chance to improve each one, to make it the best it can be. In this way, discernment is different from majority rule which seeks to find the lowest common denominator, the statement with which most of the people can agree. Discernment seeks to bring each option to its fullest expression rather than reducing it to its least-objectionable state.

After each option has been re-written in the best possible light, then the group may select one to three possibilities that seem to surface as the paths which hold the most appeal. Working with this more manageable number, their task then is to weigh each one, seeking to discover which most conforms to God's will. As they discuss ramifications, group members will want to bring to their task a sound, rational analysis based on the best available information; yet discernment goes beyond the analytical to engage the senses, feelings, imagination, and intuition. It often points toward a decision, but it's not the same process as problem solving.

In the selection process, more than human judgment is involved. The group trusts the working of the Spirit to guide them in their decision. For that reason, this step in the process should not be hurried. The group needs time, sometimes even a few weeks, to sit with the options, to abide in God's presence, to pray for direction, and to listen to the voice of the Spirit before moving to closure. Resting in such uncertainty may feel somewhat uncomfortable especially if the group is feeling the pressure to take quick action or to be efficient. Nevertheless, it is crucial to the discernment process to take the time needed to stand on holy ground and to wait for God's direction and leading.



*The group needs time, sometimes even a few weeks, to sit with the options, to abide in God's presence, to pray for direction, and to listen to the voice of Spirit before moving to closure.*

## Movement five: Embarking in a new direction

As the two disciples sit down to eat with the stranger in Emmaus, Jesus takes the bread, he blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them and suddenly they see in a new way. In a moment of "ah-ha!" they discern his presence with them and it moves them to action. Immediately, they are filled with energy and joy which carries them back out into the night. They travel the seven miles back to Jerusalem and find the other disciples gathered together. They can hardly wait to tell them the news, how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. The eleven confirm their new found insight by reporting that Jesus has also appeared to Simon.

Where the other four movements in the discernment process seek to constantly open the group to new insight and wisdom, now the process moves toward closure and the selection of one course of action. From the silence of solitude, the discernment group returns to share their wisdom and to identify the option on which the Spirit seems to rest. When the leader senses that the group has come to an agreement, he or she states the apparent consensus of the group: “It sounds like we’re saying we believe God is leading us to do ... Is that true?” Then each person in turn responds in one of four ways as outlined in *Discerning God’s Will Together*, p. 93:

1. I like this option as stated.
2. I am concerned, but I will support this option.
3. I am uneasy about this option because ... but I will stand aside and abide by the wisdom of the group.
4. I cannot support this option.

If there is not an obvious consensus, if the group is seriously divided or at an impasse, then they may choose various strategies at this point (These items are part of a list of strategies from *Discerning God’s Will Together*, p93.):

- *Reconsider the guiding principle, test again to see that the group is willing to open their hearts completely to seeking God’s will and then repeat the rest of the movements of the discernment process.*
- *Take time for further prayer and reflection.*
- *Decide with the majority but allow for a minority report.*
- *Ask someone with the gift of wisdom whom the group trusts to speak about what he or she thinks God is calling the church to do.*
- *Vote by majority rule.*
- *Count only the yes votes.*
- *Drop it.*

If the group has come to consensus, the members should “rest” with the decision for a time, taking note of their feelings. Then they should share their feelings with one another. Is the group at peace with the decision? Is it able to see the fruits of the Spirit in its choice? If so, there is cause for celebration and thanksgiving!

Then, it is time to implement the decision. At this point, the discernment group may wish to submit its discernment to the larger community and ask it to participate in formulating a plan of action, deciding which steps need to be taken, when each piece of the plan needs to be accomplished and designating who will be responsible for each step.

## Questions for Discussion

1. What are the primary tasks of each Movement?
2. What are some pitfalls a group practicing discernment might wish to avoid?
3. Who might lead your congregation through the Movements of Discernment?

## How it worked in one congregation

One small Christian Church located in an urban neighborhood found itself in the middle of a discernment process almost by accident. It all began when the city delivered a mandate: clean out the blackberry bushes on the vacant lot behind the church or face a hefty fine. The bushes had become a catch-all for neighborhood garbage and a possible breeding ground for rats. Something had to be done within the next 3 months. So the chair of the board called for a congregational forum to discuss the church's options.

As they talked together, the members of the church began to shape the question by exploring all facets of the issue.

- From the old-timers in the church, they learned about the dream that vacant lot had held for the congregation when they raised money for the first phase of their building. They had hoped one day they would grow large enough to erect a large sanctuary on the property.
- From those who lived in the neighborhood, they heard complaints about the cars taking up all the available street parking on Sunday morning and about the unsightly mess of brambles and trash on the vacant lot. But the neighbors were also concerned that a new parking lot would turn out to be a place for drug activity.
- From members of the congregation who had trouble walking, they heard how hard it was to have to park so far away from the front door on Sunday morning.
- Finally, it became clear what the question was that was facing the church: "What is God calling us to do with our vacant lot in light of our parking problem?"

Next, those at the congregational forum discussed the principles which they believed should guide their decision:

1. We want to be a good neighbor to our community.
2. We want our church to be easily accessible to all people.
3. We want to be good stewards of the land which has been entrusted to us.

Several weeks went by while members of the congregation talked informally about their concerns and dreams for the church. By the time the issue reached the agenda of the board meeting, it was clear that everyone was going to have to turn loose of their own "favorite solution" if a consensus was going to be reached about what to do. So the board took several minutes of silence as a time of "letting go." At the end, the members joined in prayer asking to be open to God's will for the church. Then they were ready to consider all the possibilities available to them.

Together, they retold the story of Jeremiah who bought a field as a way of showing he was invested in the future of Judah even though its leaders were being marched off to exile (Jeremiah 32:1-44) and remembered the faith of those who had purchased the vacant lot as an inheritance for their congregation. They heard the story of neighborhood youth who had no real place to play. They listened to the frustration of church members who had spent several days a year ago, using rented equipment to do the hard work of removing the blackberry brambles, only to be faced with doing the same task all over again.

From their sharing, they came up with two possible directions they could take and created a task force to research each one:

1. Sell the property and use the money to create new vertical parking spaces in front of the church.

2. Pave the lot so it could serve as a parking lot on Sundays and a basketball court for neighborhood youth during the week.

The task forces looked at costs, zoning laws and liability exposure. Then they reported their findings to the board.

- The cost of paving the lot was prohibitive and it would be difficult to get the permits necessary to assure proper drainage.
- The city would not allow new parking places to be created in front of the church.
- From their research, it was apparent that other possibilities would need to be generated. So the board went back to the drawing board.

They read studies about how the number of parking spaces in a congregation's lot relates to church growth. They considered how many spaces could be created in a gravel lot. They learned about environmental impact of oil seepage into ground water. They talked and struggled and prayed together. But ultimately, it was the Bible story of Jeremiah that led them to their decision.

"You know, I was thinking about that story," one of the board members said. "It was Jeremiah's dream that one day that land could be cultivated. I know the city sponsors a Pea-patch program. They divide the land into 10x10 foot lots that people of the neighborhood who live in apartments can farm. The city gets the soil ready and provides the water. The people do the work and harvest their own crop. In the process, the garden becomes a neighborhood gathering spot where community can be created. Maybe the folks who live around here would feel like they had more of a future if they had a little bit of land they could call their own."

There was silence in the room and then a kind of gentle murmuring as those on the board considered the possibility of leasing their land to the city for a dollar so it could be turned into a Pea-patch. It was an idea that would honor their principles of neighborliness, and stewardship, but what about their value of accessibility?

"Well, what if those of us who are able-bodied made it a point to park a few blocks away from the church on Sunday morning so we don't inundate the neighborhood with cars. The walk would do us good! Then, we could reserve the whole block in front for those with limited mobility."

Would the whole congregation make the effort to park and walk to church? The board decided the plan was worth a try.

One year later, the vacant lot was filled with a patchwork of gardens reflecting the international diversity of the farmers. Members of the church consistently parked some distance from the front door. In fact, many enjoyed parking on the street the garden faced just so they could see the changes taking place from week to week. Sometimes they struck up conversations with those who were working and sometimes they just admired the beautiful flowers and vegetables. Meanwhile, the older members of the congregation were really enjoying the "red carpet treatment" they were getting on Sunday morning, driving right up to the front door to park.

### **Follow-up questions to discuss about the congregational example**

1. In this story, there is an informal movement through the discernment process and sometimes a re-visiting of certain steps. Where can you identify the five elements of engaging, emptying, encountering, examining, and embarking?
2. How did the interaction between the board and the whole congregation during the discernment process lend strength to the decision?
3. Where do you see the Spirit at work in this story?
4. What did this congregation have to say “no” to in order to say “yes” to the plan which emerged as a result of the discernment process?
5. What do you think was going on in the silence in response to the board member’s idea of turning the land into a garden?
6. How might the symbol of a garden continue to speak to the congregation in the future?

## The five Movements of Discernment: A summary

### 1. Engaging Christ

- What's going on? How can we state clearly the issue or question with which we are being confronted?
- Is this a significant issue which deserves the prayerful, informed, deliberate effort of the congregation through the time-intensive process of discernment?
- Which core values reflecting Christ's Spirit and mission can serve as channel markers as we navigate our way through rough water during the discernment process?

### 2. Emptying ourselves

- What preconceived ideas and agenda do each of us hold about the question we are considering?
- What do we each need to let go of in order to be indifferent to all but God's will?

### 3. Encountering our past and present

- What are the Biblical images of texts that come to mind regarding the question at hand?
- What experiences from our lives can inform our discernment process?
- Which other people or perspectives currently are not represented in our group? What arrangement will we need to make in order to listen to those voices?

### 4. Examining new possibilities

- What options or paths which honor Christ's Spirit and mission could we choose?
- How can we make each option the best it can be?
- What might be the possible outcome of choosing or not choosing each option?
- As we prayerfully sit with the options, which three or four seem to most embody God's intention for us at this time?

### 5. Embarking in a new direction

- Out of the possible paths we've identified, does there seem to be one option upon which the Spirit "rests"?
- Do we have consensus regarding the selection of one option?
- If we don't have consensus, what shall we do?
- What steps will we need to take to share this decision with the whole congregation and then to act on it?
- How shall we celebrate God's presence and guidance which has shown itself to us in the discernment process?

## Chapter 5

# The leaders tool box

*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.  
1 Corinthians 12:10*

## Leading the discernment process

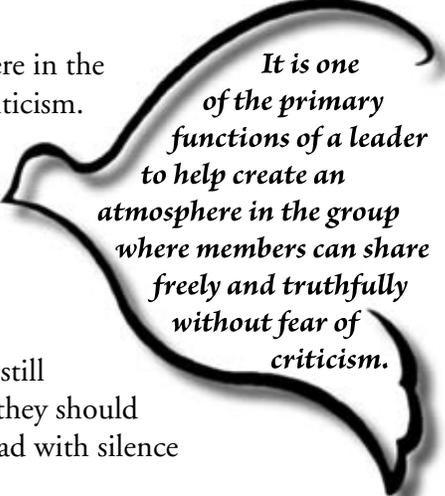
For all its rich history, discernment is a fairly new practice for most groups of Christians today. That means, we all need patient practice to master the skills associated with it and leaders to help guide the process along the way. Such leaders may hold the official title of “pastor” or “elder” in a congregation, one called out to be a spiritual leader, teacher, and care giver in the church. Or they may be informally recognized as those with special skills in facilitating the process of small groups or with the particular gift of wisdom.

Those who lead groups through discernment should be people committed to practicing the spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible reading, and tithing in their own lives. They should be able to lead with an inviting rather than a controlling manner, creating a sense of freedom and hospitality. They should be perceptive enough to detect individual efforts to sidetrack the group and strong enough to keep the group on course, even in the face of those who would sabotage the process. They should be able to model honest, forthright communication and to foster that style of openness within a group.

In addition to such qualities, those who facilitate the practice of discernment should be familiar with several techniques that can help the process move smoothly in a small-group setting. They should be able to restate or summarize clearly and succinctly where the group is in the moment, holding up a mirror so they can see themselves. They should be able to sense when the time is right to call for a decision to be made and when it's more appropriate to wait. They also should be able to call the group to accountability in terms of treating each other with respect and suspending assumptions.

It is one of the primary functions of a leader to help create an atmosphere in the group where members can share freely and truthfully without fear of criticism. That can be done, in part, by asking members of the group to covenant together from the beginning to keep the conversations of the group confidential and to refrain from sarcastic humor and put-downs.

Because the practice of discernment is always laced with silence, leaders will need to give particular attention to helping the group learn how to still themselves in order to listen to the guidance of God's Spirit. To do so, they should try to be sensitive to the experience group members may already have had with silence in other situations.



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Some things people have said are:

- I'm never very comfortable with silence. I tend to associate it with my mother's way of expressing disapproval.
- In my African-American cultural tradition, if the Spirit of God is in you there should be some visual sign or verbal response. Periods of silence are experienced as the departing of the anointing of the spirit. Once when I paused at the beginning of my sermon, people began to pray aloud that God would give me some words to say!
- I'm not a good conversationalist. I'm always glad to be in a group where people are not too talkative. It gives me a chance to think of what to say.
- I hate it when people are silent. I always think they are afraid to speak their minds. I'd rather have disagreements out in the open.
- I'm an extrovert and silence is just not natural for me. It's too inhibiting."<sup>15</sup>

Discernment leaders can ease a group's anxiety by stating how long the silence will be before entering into it, thus relieving people of the need to guess or worry.

Discernment leaders also have the responsibility for preparing the space where a group will meet. They should try to create a serene, comfortable environment that is free of visual clutter. The room should be quiet and a comfortable temperature should be maintained. Chairs should be placed in a circle, not around a table. This will allow communication to flow freely among group members. A worship center using art, pottery, objects from nature, or a simple candle which is placed in the center of the group can focus the group's attention on the topic at hand and can serve as a reminder of Christ's presence.

As leaders help groups move through the process of discernment, they will want to pay attention to the tasks of each Movement. Below are some suggestions as to where leaders should focus their attention at each step along the way and some specific exercises to choose from which can facilitate the group's progress.

## **Movement one: Engaging Christ**

In this movement, the subject for discernment is framed as a question. Boundaries for the discussion are set by naming the principles which will guide the process. The group wrestles with the question, "What is at stake when we enter into the process of discernment regarding this issue?"

During this movement the leader will want to focus on helping the group to identify the question which is facing them, and to state it in simple, clear language understandable to those both inside and outside the group. Participants may be tempted to conclusions by including a suggestion of an answer in the question or to blame a person or group for the situation in which the church finds itself, so it will be important for the leader to encourage them to formulate an open-ended, real question which can be explored fully before discerning the direction to take. The way the question is phrased may determine, to a large degree, the answer which is received.

The second task of the leader in this movement is to help the group identify those bedrock principles which form the mixing bowl in which all the other ingredients of the discernment process will be poured. It is important that these be values general enough that they do not hinder the leading of the Spirit (especially when the Spirit may be calling the church to do something which feels uncomfortable or unfamiliar), and specific enough that the group can test its decision against them at the conclusion of the discernment process. (A group that says, "A guiding principle of our process is that our congregation is going to stay in this building no matter what," is being too specific!)

# TOOLS for helping a group accomplish the tasks associated with this movement:

## *Framing the Question for Discernment*

### How Did We Get Here?<sup>16</sup>

This exercise helps the group tell the story which brought them to the point of needing to frame a new question.

1. Invite each person in the group to give a small piece of the history. Begin with the phrase, “In the beginning ...”
2. Ask group members to add their own part starting with one of these phrases:
  - “And then ...”
  - “But, before that ...”
  - “Meanwhile, back at the ranch ...”
3. When the story feels complete, ask the whole group to notice any themes or threads which they heard in the story.
4. Discuss: “What question do you think the events of the story are leading us to ask as a church?”

### A Letter to the Church

This exercise is designed to help the group identify the gap between God’s call to faithfulness and the life and mission of the congregation in the present.

1. Read aloud the prologue from Revelation to set the scene:

*“John, your brother who shares with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, “Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.”*”
2. Divide into pairs or triads and invite each one to read one of the selections from “Letters to the Seven Lampstands.” See pp. 37-39. Discuss these questions, then summarize their findings for the whole group:
  - For what does John commend the congregation?
  - For what does John scold the church?
  - What tensions has the congregation been facing?
  - How do these tensions present the congregation with an opportunity for ministry? How do they present the congregation with a danger?
3. Invite each pair or triad to write a letter to their own congregation in the style of John’s letter.
  - Ask them to begin with statement “For this I commend you:”, then to list the current ministries of the church which they believe are faithful to God’s purposes.
  - Next, have them write: “But this I have against you:” followed by a list of those things in the life of the church which do not seem to be faithful to God’s purposes.
  - Invite them to conclude by writing the advice they believe God is giving them in answer to the question, “What should we do now to be faithful?”
4. Invite members of the group to share the letters aloud.
5. Discuss: What question for discernment is suggested by what we just heard?

## Letters to the Seven Lampstands (A reflection on excerpts from Revelation 2-3)

*John, your brother who shares with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."*

### **To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:**

*I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary.*

*But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.*

*Remember then from what you have fallen; repent and do the works you did at first.*

(Ephesus was the greatest port city in Asia. It's patron deity was Diana and its stores were famous for selling talismans for those who held to superstitions.)

### **To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:**

*I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan.*

*Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you in prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction.*

*Be faithful until death, and I will give you a crown of life.*

(Smyrna was a beautiful city of trade and culture where a west wind often blew. The disadvantage of the wind was that it carried the smell of the sewage which drained into the gulf back to the city instead of out to sea.)

### **To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:**

*I know you are living where Satan's throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives.*

*But I have a few things against you; you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication. So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.*

*Repent then.*

(Pergamum was the capital city famous for the manufacture of parchment. Nicolaitans and Balaamites taught that Christians were free to eat food offered to idols and to practice immorality in the name of religion.)

**To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:**

*I know your works, your love, faith service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first.*

*But this I have against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication.*

*But the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what we call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden; only hold fast to what you have until I come.*

(Thyatira was a city on a trade route. It was known for its textile industry. Many of its citizens belonged to business guilds where they drank and ate meat at common meals which had been sacrificed to Roman deities.)

**To the angel of the church in Sardis write:**

*I know your works: you have a name of being alive, but you are dead.*

*Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard; obey it and repent.*

*If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.*

(Sardis was a city of wealth situated on a high plateau. Twice the citizens lost their city to invading armies because they were too complacent to keep watch.)

**To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:**

*I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.*

*I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have so that no one may seize your crown.*

(Situated in a grape-growing region, Philadelphia was a center of Greek culture.)

**And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write:**

*I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor blind, and naked.*

*Therefore, I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire that you may be rich and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.*

*Be earnest therefore and repent.*

(Laodicea was a banking and financial center. It was also known for its famous medical center where salves were produced for the ears and eyes. Since it did not have a good supply of water of its own, it had water piped to the city through an aqueduct from a hot springs some distance away. By the time it reached the city, it was lukewarm.)

## Book cover

This exercise is designed to help the group determine what question may be presenting itself to the congregation.

1. Place a number of pictures face up on the table in front of the group. (They may be art prints, photographs, or simply pictures cut from wall calendars or magazines.)
2. Ask: "If you were to choose a picture to serve as the front cover of a book about our congregation right now, which one would it be?" Give member of the group time to actually select the pictures and take them back to their seats.
3. Invite each person to tell why he or she chose that particular picture.
4. When each person has shared the selected picture, ask: "What themes did you hear repeated in the group?"
5. Discuss: "What questions do the themes suggest we should be asking as a congregation?"

## *Identifying core principles to serve as guides*

### Values from scripture<sup>17</sup>

This exercise helps members of the group identify values from the Bible which are important to them personally and collectively.

1. Ask group members to name a favorite scripture passage which has directed their lives in some specific way. Invite them to share why those scriptures speak to them and what emotions it raises in them. Invite each one to tell a story of how the scripture chosen affected an event in their lives.
2. As a group, discuss which Biblical principles are shared by several members of the group. How are those same values reflected or not reflected in the life of the whole congregation?
3. Make a list of core principles which could guide the work of the discernment process in light of your discussion.

### Time line<sup>18</sup>

This exercise is designed to identify core values which have been part of the congregation's history over time.

1. Place two long tables end to end and cover them with paper from a roll.
2. Draw a line lengthwise in the middle of the paper. Divide it into decades.
3. Invite members of the group to record on the line:
  - The date they became associated with the congregation;
  - Names of significant events or ministries in the life of the congregation;
  - Defining moments in the life of the congregation; and
  - People who have been influential in shaping the direction of the congregation in the past.
4. Discuss: What important stories are associated with this time line? How can we see God at work in our history? What principles have been important to this congregation through the years? Which of those principles might guide our discernment process now?

## Mission statement

This exercise is designed to help the group identify principles which are central to the congregation's life and ministry.

1. Obtain copies of the congregation's mission statement for each member of the group or, if the congregation has no mission statement, use these mission statements from the life of Jesus as expressed by each of the gospel writers:
  - Matthew 4:13-17;
  - Mark 1:14;
  - Luke 4:16-21; and
  - John 10:10b.
2. Invite group members to read the statement aloud in unison.
3. Discuss: What are the key values expressed in this statement? What key principles can we identify in this document which could be helpful to us in the discernment process?

## Movement two: Emptying ourselves

During this movement, the group seeks to release its preconceived ideas about the question it is considering in order to open itself more fully to God's guidance. It is a way of approaching the task in a posture of confessional humility. Humility can help the group avoid the distortions of both excessive self-confidence and exaggerated self-doubt, accepting the uniqueness of each person's particular experience and the limited nature of that knowledge.

During this movement the leader will help the group identify and set aside any ego-driven desires that would keep them from "holy indifference" to the outcome of the process. Such indifference does not denote apathy; rather it simply avows that nothing is more important than knowing and doing God's will.

The willingness to face our own self-deceptions is crucial to our ability to hear God's voice. But it is not easy to be truthful with ourselves. Sometimes we have simply held an opinion for so long, or a voice from our past has been so ingrained in us that it's hard to sort out what constitutes "God's will" and what constitutes "our will" in any situation. Sometimes fear keeps us from letting go of a strongly held notion, even when we know it comes from our own need for control. It will be important in this movement for the leader to be both gentle and persistent, inviting those in the group to identify for themselves what their own agendas might be, and then providing a time of releasing so they can be more fully ready to listen to what God is calling them to do.

Afterward, it will be appropriate to simply test where the group is by asking, "How ready are we to completely open our hearts to God's will?" inviting group members to report one by one to the group how they are honestly feeling:

- Yes, I think I can sincerely open myself to God's intention.
- I want to be indifferent to everything but God's will, but I have had a lot invested in this issue in the past. I am still struggling to let go of my own desires.
- As each person shares, it will be important for the leader to disallow any judgment from the rest of the group.

When members of the group have had a chance to report how open they believe they can be, the leader may choose to make a summary statement of where the group is as a whole:

- "sounds like we have opened our hearts to God and that we're ready to proceed."

- “sounds like we have opened our hearts to God as much as we can at this moment. We know there are still barriers for some of us, they don’t seem to be so profound that we can’t proceed with the intent of growing in our willingness to set aside our own desires as we move through the process.”
- “sounds like we are unable, at this point, to sincerely open ourselves up to God’s intention for our group, so I believe we should wait awhile before entering into a process of discernment on this issue.”

## *Tools for helping a group accomplish the tasks associated with this movement:*

### **Mold me and make me<sup>19</sup>**

This exercise is to help the group members identify and release obstacles coming from their own ego needs in order to be as fully receptive to God’s leading as possible.

1. Give each person in the group a small lump of clay. As quiet music is played, invite them to shape the clay according to the ideas they already may be carrying about the topic for the discernment process.
2. When they have finished shaping the clay, invite anyone who would like to share aloud to do so. (*This sharing should be purely optional.*)
3. Sing “Have Thine Own Way, Lord” (#588 in the Chalice Hymnal) as a prayer, offering up those preconceived ideas to God.
4. Invite members of the group to return their clay shapes to lumps and then to put their lumps of clay together in one large ball as a symbolic way of stating their intention to submit their individual will to the will of God and to seek God’s leading as a group “in communion.”
5. Offer a prayer of confession, bidding God’s Spirit to guide the group.

### **Weave us together<sup>20</sup>**

This exercise is to help the group members identify and release obstacles coming from their own ego needs in order to be as fully receptive to God’s leading as possible.

1. Give each person in the group a 1/2 inch-wide strip of paper. As quiet music is played, invite them to write on the paper the ideas they already may be carrying about the topic for the discernment process.
2. When they have finished writing, invite anyone who would like to share aloud to do so. (*This sharing should be purely optional.*)
3. Sing “Weave” (# 495 in the Chalice Hymnal) as a prayer, offering up those preconceived ideas to God.
4. Using the frame of a small embroidery hoop, invite members of the group to weave their strips of paper as a symbolic way of stating their intention to submit their individual will to the will of God and to seek God’s leading as a group “in communion.”
5. Offer a prayer of confession, bidding God’s Spirit to guide the group.

### **Unburdening<sup>21</sup>**

This exercise is to help the group members identify and release obstacles coming from their own ego needs in order to be as fully receptive to God’s leading as possible.

Invite those in the group to consider anything that might serve to burden them in the process of discernment, hindering them from being totally free to listen to God’s voice and to be open to God’s leading. As quiet music is played, invite them to imagine that their burdens are being wiped away.

1. Ask each one in turn to come sit with eyes closed in a chair. Stand behind the chair. Gently drape a tea towel over one of their shoulders. Holding it at one corner, pull the towel toward you so it eventually slides off. Repeat on the other side so the person in the chair enjoys the physical sensation of feeling the burdens being “wiped” off both shoulders.
2. After each person has had a turn in the chair, offer a prayer on behalf of the group.

## **Movement three: Encountering our past and present**

In this movement, information is gathered about the issue at hand. Stories from the Bible, from personal experience and from the church’s collective tradition are told. Voices from the margins of the community are solicited in order to gain fresh insight and perspective. Participants are called upon to explore all facets of an issue, to listen to each other, to notice what is going on in the narratives, and to identify common threads which might point to the movement of the Spirit.

During this movement the leader may need to encourage those in the group to share stories or remembrances from scripture. Often people feel inadequate when it comes to this task, believing they are not “Bible scholars.” But once they get started, they often discover they know more than they first believe they do and one story will prompt another.

Leaders will also need to help the group develop the skill of storytelling. Sharing personal experiences is to be a way of noticing how God has been at work; it is not an occasion to complain or to blame others for something which is not going well in the life of the church. Stories should be told using the first person. It is more helpful for them to be one to two minute descriptions of a specific incident rather than long, general pronouncements or assessments of how things “ought to be.”

### *Tools for helping a group accomplish the tasks associated with this movement:*

#### **Listening to the Biblical story**

##### **Standing inside the story**

This exercise is designed to help members of the group use all their senses to learn from scripture. Select a passage of scripture. Read it aloud.

1. Invite the group to close their eyes and imagine the scene in the passage. Who are the people there? What colors do they see? What sounds, smells, textures, and tastes are present?
2. In a few minutes of silence or with quiet music playing, invite the members of the group to walk around the scene in their imaginations. If they desire, invite them to engage one of the characters in dialogue.
3. Afterwards, invite group members to share aloud anything they noticed or anything they learned during the exercise.

##### **The living word<sup>22</sup>**

This exercise is designed to help the group focus on particular words or phrases which may be speaking to them in light of the current situation.

1. Invite one person to read a scripture passage aloud while other members of the group listen and let the words sink in.

2. After a moment of silence, invite another person to read the scripture aloud again while members of the group listen for a word or phrase that seems to speak to them in light of the question for discernment which is being raised.
3. Invite members of the group to speak aloud the word or phrase in turn without any other comments.
4. After a moment of silence, invite a third person to read the scripture aloud. Afterwards, ask: What might God be saying to us about our question for discernment through this passage?

### **Many witnesses**

This exercise is designed to help the group identify scripture passages which might shed some light on the question for discernment and to explore one of those passages in depth.

1. Read the question for discernment aloud. Ask members of the group to reflect in silence, noticing if any scriptures come to mind in light of that question.
2. After a period of silence, invite the group to name any passages which came to mind. (They do not have to quote chapter and verse; they may merely make a reference to the passage such as, "I was reminded of the story of Mary and Martha when Jesus came to dinner.") List the passages they name on newsprint or a board. (At this point they do not have to explain what connection, if any, they see between the scripture and the question for discernment.)
3. After the list is made ask, "Are there any scriptures on this list that surprised you? Which one passage would you like to explore in depth?"
4. When the group has selected a passage, ask someone in the group to read it slowly and then for others to reflect on what they hear in light of the question for discernment. What does this passage seem to be saying to us at this moment? Can we think of any other passages of scripture that offer a view which is in opposition to this one?

## **Listening to the voice of experience**

### **Gift box<sup>23</sup>**

This exercise is to invite those in the group to share their own stories in relation to the question for discernment.

1. Place a large gift-wrapped box in the center of the group.
2. Ask the group to consider their experience with or wisdom about the topic for discernment in silence.
3. Invite the group to share stories they have which may shed some light on the issue at hand. (Each story should be kept to 2-3 minutes.)
4. Thank God for the gifts of wisdom and experience group members have shared.

### **Story weaving<sup>24</sup>**

In this exercise, group members weave their own stories with the Biblical witness.

1. Select a significant story from the life of the church or from the community. Invite the group to retell the story as a group using the connecting phrases "And then ... But before that ... Meanwhile back at the Ranch ..." (See the exercise How Did We Get Here? above).
2. Invite the group to unpack the story by identifying the people involved along with their roles and feelings. Also identify other people or groups affected by the event.
3. Encourage the group to capture the essence of the story by selecting an agreed-upon symbol for the story.
4. Assist the group in connecting the story with scripture: a story, person, theme, verse, or

image which comes to mind.

5. Ask someone to read the scripture so it is well-fixed in the minds of the group members.
6. Help the group weave the stories together by laying the Biblical witness alongside the group's story. Does the scripture
  - affirm the group's story?
  - confront the group's story?
  - entice the story to move toward change?
  - transform the group's story into something new?
7. Discuss: What have we learned from this experience which can aid us in the discernment process?

### **Voices from the margins**

This exercise is designed to help the group broaden its perspective by inviting in other voices to speak to the question for discernment.

1. Ask: Who will be affected by the decision we make? Whose voices might we need to hear?
2. When those voices have been identified, the group may hear their stories in several different forms:
  - by reading an article on the topic for discernment;
  - by watching a movie relevant to the topic for discernment;
  - by inviting a guest to speak to the group; and
  - by inviting a panel of people to speak to the group.
3. Discuss: What did we learn from these voices? How might our new learning influence our process?

## **Movement four: Examining new possibilities**

In this movement, various options or paths which could be followed are identified and the community imagines, in turn, what it would be like to commit to each one. The group asks, "What patterns, ideas, possibilities seem to be emerging which point to God's desire for our future action? Are there ways we can improve upon the ideas which are emerging? Where do we need further clarity?" Consequences are weighed to see if the results lead to consolation (a sense of peace and movement toward God) or desolation (a sense of dis-ease and movement away from God). Too little time spent on this movement produces a weak commitment to action; too much time creates inertia.

During this movement the leader will work to keep the process moving, to help the group open itself to all the possibilities and then to weigh each possibility in light of the guiding principles set forth at the beginning of the process and the probable results of taking each path. During the first part of this movement, it is very important to maintain a sense of safety in the group so members feel free to share their ideas without criticism. It is also important to keep the group from jumping too soon to a solution before they have spent the time weighing the consequences for each one.

## *Tools for helping a group accomplish the tasks associated with this movement:*

### **Exploring and Improving the Options**

#### **Brainstorming in triads**

1. Ask members of the group to team up in threes to brainstorm for twenty minutes all the possible directions, options, approaches they can think of with regard to the discernment issue. They should write each idea with a marker on an 8½ x 11 piece of paper (one idea per paper written largely and boldly so it can be seen across the room).
2. Invite each triad to post their options on the wall, reading aloud the ideas and expanding on them as necessary.
3. Invite members to group the pieces of paper, finding those ideas that seem to “go together.”
4. Assist the group in refining and improving each option so it is stated in its best possible form.

#### **Fish bowl**

In this exercise, members of the group talk about the issue at hand and then identify possible directions to take.

1. Divide the group in half. Ask one half to sit in a circle. Then invite the other half to form a circle around them so there is a circle within a circle.
2. Give each member of the inner circle a slip of paper with a role written on it for them to play. The role should represent one of the “voices” heard earlier in the group’s process. (Perhaps one of the people who would be affected by the decision.)
3. Invite the inside circle to discuss the freely the issue for discernment for about fifteen minutes while those on the outside circle observe and listen to others observe and listen. During the discussion, those in the inner circle should speak out of the role they have been given using the pronoun “I”.
4. After the discussion, invite those in the outside circle to share what they noticed. Then ask, “What possible directions were suggested by the discussion? Are there other directions we should consider as a group?” List those which are named on newsprint or a board. Rewrite them as needed to make them be the best they can be.

#### **Research the options**

Sometimes it is apparent that the group needs to research various directions to see which ones are actually feasible to consider. This exercise is to help a group find out the answers they need to move the process forward.

1. If several general directions seem to be presenting themselves to the group, but the group needs more information about the feasibility of each, assign each direction to an individual or a team of individuals within the group to research.
2. Invite them to report out their findings to the group.
3. Ask: Which possible directions seem to be possible given what we’ve heard? How can we make those options the best they can be?

# Weighing the Options

## Positives/Negatives

This exercise is designed to help the group imagine the possible outcomes of taking certain actions and to identify the obstacles which might stand in the way of each one.

1. Write out each possible option on a separate piece of newsprint at the top. Divide the group into pairs and give each one a possibility.
2. Ask each pair to imagine that the possibility has become a reality. Have them list on newsprint the positives which are now taking place because this choice has been made. Then list the negatives which have come to be because this choice has been made.
3. Next, ask them to imagine that the possibility has been rejected. List the positives which have come as result of making that choice. List the negatives which have come from not taking such an action.
4. Invite the pairs to share their lists with the whole group.

## From the other side

This exercise is to help those in the group broaden their willingness to consider other options.

1. Look at the list of possible directions generated by the group. Ask: Is there anyone who feels himself or herself particularly drawn to one option?
2. After identifying someone who is drawn to one possibility, ask the question again to identify someone who is drawn to another option.
3. Ask the two people tell all the reasons why the other's selection should be chosen by the group.
4. Invite the group to state what it noticed about what it just heard.

## Multiple perspectives<sup>25</sup>

This exercise is to help the group weigh a decision from many different perspectives.

1. Create a disk about eighteen inches in diameter from thick paper which can be written upon. Lay the wheel in the center of the group. Write the question for discernment in the center of the wheel.
2. Draw lines across the wheel as if cutting pie, dividing the wheel into equal slices--one for each member of the group. Write each person's name on a slice.
3. Then write up cards with the names of titles of eight or more individuals or groups who have a stake in the discernment question. Some may be from members of the congregation, others may be from outside the church. Place the cards around the outside of the wheel in line with the pie slices containing group members names.
4. Ask each person in turn to weigh the pros and cons of one possible decision from the perspective of the individual or group who is on the card by their pie slice. If that person feels as if he or she does not know enough to speak from that individual's or group's perspective, he or she may pass.
5. After each person in the group has taken a turn, rotate the wheel one name to the left so that each person's name appears opposite a new individual or group who has a stake in the discernment issue. Ask each person in turn to weigh the pros and cons of one possible decision from the perspective of the new individual or group who is on the card by their pie slice.
6. Keep repeating the process until everyone in the group has spoken for each individual or group listed on the cards. Then switch to a different possible option and start over again.
7. Discuss: What have we learned from this exercise that will help us move forward in our process?

## Movement five: Embarking in a new direction

Because we cannot keep matters up in the air forever, this step calls for decision and action. Where the previous four movements call for constantly opening to new insight, wisdom, and possibilities, this movement calls for closure, bringing the discernment process to a natural conclusion. The group asks, “What is God’s guidance regarding the issue before us? What new steps shall we take together in light of such guidance?”

During this movement the leader has a tricky path to walk. On the one hand, the leader does not want to press the group for a decision too soon. On the other hand, a group who is never pressed to choose may come to believe that the practice of discernment is simply a way of avoiding making decisions about tough issues. It takes practice to be able to tell when a group is ready to come to consensus.

If a consensus does not come easily, it is likely that one or more members of the group may say, “Oh, let’s just take a vote and get this over with!” When that happens, it is the task of the leader to keep the group from giving up too soon and to help them re-focus on their commitment to complete the discernment process.

However, after a time, if it is clear the group is truly at an impasse, the leader should help them select one of the following paths to take:

- Reconsider the guiding principle, test again to see that the group is willing to open their hearts completely to seeking God’s will and then repeat the rest of the movements of the discernment process.
- Take time for further prayer and reflection.
- Decide with the majority but allow for a minority report.
- Ask someone with the gift of wisdom whom the group trusts to speak about what she or he thinks God is calling the church to do.
- Vote by majority rule.
- Count only the yes votes.
- Drop it.

When a decision has been made, it is important to “rest” with it for a while to see if it really is the right one. During that time, help the group notice whether they are feeling consolation or desolation about what they have chosen.

## *Tools for helping a group accomplish the tasks associated with this movement:*

### **Forced choice<sup>26</sup>**

This exercise is designed to help a group prioritize possible directions.

1. Put letters of the alphabet in front of each possible direction on the list.
2. Give individuals in the group a copy of the following grid. Ask them to circle which choice they prefer in each of the pairs listed:

Which decision in each of the pairs listed do you believe God is calling the congregation to choose?

A or B				
A or C	B or C			
A or D	B or D	C or D		
A or E	B or E	C or E	D or E	
A or F	B or F	C or F	D or F	E or F

How many times did you choose A?	
How many times did you choose B?	
How many times did you choose C?	
How many times did you choose D?	
How many times did you choose E?	
How many times did you choose F?	

1. Total up the number of times each member of the group chose each letter. Notice if one or two decisions were chosen more than others.
2. Ask members of the group in turn to share reasons for their preferences.
3. Check to see if there is any change in the group's sense of which possibility is the best choice after the sharing has taken place.

### **Reflective decision-making<sup>27</sup>**

This exercise is designed to help people reflect prayerfully on the choice they believe God is calling the group to make.

1. Allow individuals time to pray and reflect on these questions:
  - If you were deciding this question all by yourself right now, what do you believe God is calling the congregation to do? Write it down. Hold the paper in your hand and pray with it.
  - What emotions can you identify in yourself as you hold the paper? What do you believe the source of those emotions to be?

- What would you have to give up if your decision on the paper is not the one selected? How would it change you and/or your relationship with the congregation to let go of what is written there?
  - Do you truly believe you are indifferent to all but God's will?
2. Invite them to listen contemplatively to each other after they return from their individual prayer.

## **Sharing Wisdom**

This exercise gives each person a chance to share which decision they believe God is calling them to choose without any interruption or dialogue with others in the group.

1. Go around the circle of the group and allow each person in turn to finish the sentence: "I believe God is calling us to \_\_\_\_\_ because\_\_\_\_\_."
2. Sit in silence, listening to the further wisdom of the Spirit.
3. Invite anyone who feels called to do so to make a proposal about what the group should do. Discuss the proposal as a group. See if there is consensus about what should be done next.

## **Troubleshooting**

As leaders help a group move through the discernment process, they may encounter some obstacles along the way. The following phrases are not cure-alls, but they may help those who are facilitating the process focus on what needs to be done to get the group back on track.

### **After several sessions, one or more members of the group begin questioning the validity of the discernment process itself.**

Often, it is those who are used to dominating meetings and discussion or who know how to use the subtleties of Robert's Rules to push their own agenda through who most often question discernment as a way of making decisions. However, there may be other reasons people want to put on the brakes: they may feel uncomfortable with the intuitive nature of the discernment process if that is not their normal way of gathering information from the world around them or they may feel embarrassed that they have shared too much personal information with the group. In this situation, no matter what reason is given, it is the task of the leader to help the group finish what they committed to complete together: **"Why don't we try moving all the way through the movements and then evaluate the effectiveness of the model as a group?"**

### **One or two people are dominating a meeting.**

Sometimes people keep talking simply because they are not convinced anyone has really heard what they have to say. If a leader can summarize in a satisfactory way the point the person is trying to make, express appreciation for their point of view and then turn to another speaker, sometimes the domination will stop. **"Let me see if I understand what you've said. (Summarize the point.) Thank you. Now, \_\_\_\_\_, you look like you'd like to jump into this conversation."** If the leader continues to observe that others are not getting a chance to speak, he or she may want to interrupt the process and invite more contemplative speaking and listening by passing around a "talking stick" such as those in the Native American tradition sometimes do, inviting only the person who has the stick to talk. (A votive candle may be substituted for a stick.)

### **The process has turned into a debate.**

Tilden Edwards of the Shalem Institute observes that a deliberative debate or discussion which has gone on for more than twenty minutes is ego-driven.<sup>28</sup> In that situation, it is important for the leader to interrupt the process and to help the group re-focus. “**It seems like we’re getting kind of wound up here. Let’s take just a few minutes of silence before we go on.**”

### **One or more members of the group have been silent.**

Just because someone is not saying something aloud does not necessarily mean they are not participating interiorly in what’s going on. Allow for their silence and then give them an opening to speak. “\_\_\_\_\_, we haven’t heard from you. **Would you like to share some of your wisdom with the group?**”

### **The group is conflicted.**

Conflict is a normal part of the life of any group. It is important that a leader does not allow his or her own anxiety level to rise when conflict appears, or to rush in with a solution to create harmony. If the leader can stay calm, often the group will find resolution to the controversy on their own. A leader can help a group keep their perspective as they work through a conflict by clarifying differences as they are expressed and by helping them remember the commonalities which bond them together. “**It seems like we have a difference of opinion in the group about ... but we are agreed that we want to seek out God’s guidance on the matter.**” If you can tell the issue is going to cause controversy ahead of time, plan a meeting for an extended period of time away where the group can concentrate on the issue in a retreat setting.

### **Strong views are being expressed using generalities.**

It will be the most helpful for the group to hear descriptive stories rather than editorialized orations. A leader can get the speaker back on track by saying something like, “**You may be right, but I’d like to understand more. Could you tell us about a specific incident which led you to believe that?**”

### **The Bible is being used to close down discussion rather than opening it up to wider perspectives.**

In the practice of discernment, scripture is to open us up to hearing the voice of God. We listen to its voice by standing inside it, taking on the perspective of various characters, imagining the sensory details from the time and place when it was written, and allowing it to dialogue with our own life experience. If someone in the group is using it in such a way that it is closing down conversation rather than expanding it, it will be helpful for the leader to invite other viewpoints with a question such as “**Can we think of a Biblical text that says the opposite?**” Often the scriptures will contain a number of viewpoints on a topic which can be held in tension with one another or which can inform each other in their variety. (For example: How does the commandment to honor father and mother in Exodus 20:12 relate to Jesus’ commandment to hate father and mother in Luke 14:26?)

### **One person is keeping the group from moving forward.**

A leader must be perceptive enough to see when an individual truly discerns a direction which is contrary to the wisdom of the group and when someone is simply trying to sidetrack the group purely for the purpose of satisfying a need of the ego. When a minority opinion needs to be stated, the leader might invite the individual to write one. But when a person is simply using his or her own power to keep the group from moving forward it is important for the leader to be strong enough to help the group stay with the process in spite of the individual’s protests. A sense of timing is critical. A leader must have practice to know when to bring closure to the process and when to allow for more discussion. Closing down too soon will keep the group from feeling like it “owns” the decision; going on too long will cause the group to lose momentum.

## Communicating with the congregation

Usually, when a church enters into a process of discernment, a small group does the major amount of the work while individuals in the congregation pray and perhaps offer input during Movements one and three. But one church practiced discernment with the congregation serving as a committee of the whole. Here's a time-line showing how their process worked:

### January

Administrative Boards selects an issue for discernment: "At what hour shall we worship on Sunday morning?" The question was framed: "God is it your will that we change our worship time to 10:30 a.m.?"

### February

Invitation is made via the worship bulletin and an announcement in the worship service about an opportunity to learn the movements of the discernment process in a series of workshops during the season of Lent.

### March

Monthly church newsletter carries an article introducing the practice of discernment. Lenten workshops teach the movements of the practice of group discernment to 28 people. In the fifth workshop, the group begins identifying what's at stake around the issue of discernment:

### April

Monthly church newsletter carries an article summarizing the content of the discernment workshops. Weekly worship bulletin identifies the issue for discernment.

### May

Groups within the congregation (elders, board, Sunday School classes, women's and men's groups, softball team) are invited to discuss "What's at stake in this issue?" and to share their ideas with the church office. Weekly worship bulletins identify the issue for discernment and list a compilation of what the various groups say is at stake in coming to a decision:

- This will affect Sunday School start time
- This may affect the preparation time of the other congregation which uses our building.
- There will be more time for the diaconate to prepare communion.
- The choir could warm up before church.
- Families may find it difficult to get children here in time for an earlier Sunday School.
- People with chronic illnesses would have more time to take medications and get into wheelchairs.
- All activities would move to an emotional high with worship beginning at 10:30 a.m.

- College students might visit more easily at 10:30 a.m..
- Worship hour affects time for “mingling.”

### June

Monthly church newsletter carries an article reviewing general process of discernment and how the congregation is applying it in their own situation.

### July

Other important events in the congregation’s life begin to require time and attention: refugees arrive from Southeast Asia, the writing of the new church constitution enters its final phase. The discernment process is put on hold. Weekly worship bulletin continues to identify the issue for discernment and to list a compilation of what the various groups say is at stake in coming to a decision.

### August

A guest preacher is scheduled for one or two Sundays this month and preaches about discernment.

### September

Pastor and congregational Moderator meet to evaluate progress of discernment process. They name things they have learned:

- Discernment takes longer than casting and counting votes.
- When working on something as deeply foundational as a constitution, other issues lose their importance.
- We can be faithful and pick up again where we left off, completing our commitments to God and to one another.

The Administrative Board plans retreat for the purpose of bringing closure to the discernment process.

### October

Monthly newsletter carries article about bringing closure to the discernment process at the church retreat. Worship bulletins carry announcements about church retreat. Final decision to worship at 10:30 a.m. is made at the church retreat.

### November

Decision is shared with the rest of the congregation via newsletter, worship bulletins, sign board. Decision is implemented.

## Questions for discussion

1. How did this congregation follow or not follow the Movements of Discernment? Were there any steps left out of their process?
2. What problems did the congregation seem to face during the discernment process? How could they have avoided those problems?
3. What do you think the benefits of the practice of discernment might have been for this congregation?

## Chapter 6

# Discernment resources in the Chalice Hymnal

Here is a list of some of the hymns from The Chalice Hymnal that groups practicing a process of discernment may want to sing. You may discover others! As you incorporate them into prayer, you may find it more meaningful, in some situations to change the pronouns in the lyrics from the singular to the plural (for example: from “me” to “us”).

- 236 Wind Who Makes All Winds that Blow  
*“Make our hearts and altar pyre kindle them with your own fire.”*
- 241 Holy Spirit, Truth Divine  
*“Wake my spirit, clear my sight.”*
- 242 Shaping Spirit, Move “mong Us  
*“Work like yeast within the soul.”*
- 244 Loving Spirit  
*“...teach me the discerning eye, hoist me up upon your shoulder, let me see the world from high.”*
- 254 Breathe on Me, Breath of God  
*“Until with thee I will one will”*
- 258 Holy Wisdom  
*“Who shapes a thought and makes it clear? Truthful Wisdom.”*
- 259 Spirit of the Living God  
*“Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.”*
- 265 Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart  
*“Take the dimness of my soul away.”*
- 266 Gracious Spirit, Dwell in Me  
*“Silent Spirit dwell in me, I myself would silent be.”*
- 269 Come, Holy Spirit, Fill This Place  
*“May counsel, love and peace prevail.”*
- 288 O God of Vision  
*“Grant to us insight, O God, for this time of decision.”*
- 321 Break Thou the Bread of Life  
*“Touch thou my longing eyes that I may see.”*
- 348 More About Jesus Would I Know  
*“More about Jesus let me learn, more of his holy will discern.”*
- 354 Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God  
*“Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God.”*
- 461 Lord Whose Love Through Humble Service  
*“Grant us vision till your love’s revealing light in its height and depth and greatness dawns upon our quickened sight.”*
- 463 Renew Your Church  
*“Before your presence keep us still that we may find for us your will.”*

- 464 God of Grace and God of Glory  
*"Grant us wisdom, grant us courage."*
- 465 We Are Called to Follow Jesus  
*"And let God's changes flow through us"*
- 472 We Are Living We Are Dwelling  
*"See the plan of God unfolding."*
- 491 As Grain on Scattered Hillsides  
*"Come knead and blend each texture with strong and gentle hands."*
- 495 Weave  
*"Weave us together in unity and love."*
- 526 The Gift of Love  
*"Come, Spirit, come, our hearts control."*
- 558 Savior, Like A Shepherd, Lead Us  
*"Early let us seek thy favor, early let us do thy will."*
- 565 If You Will Trust in God to Guide You  
*"So do your own part faithfully and trust God's word."*
- 572 Take Time to Be Holy  
*"Let him be thy guide."*
- 575 Come and Find the Quiet Center  
*"Clear the chaos and the clutter, clear our eyes that we can see."*
- 582 Come Down, O Love Divine  
*"And let your glorious light shine ever on my sight and clothe me round the while  
my path illumining."*
- 583 Lead Me, Guide Me  
*"Lead me, O Lord, lead me."*
- 586 Open my Eyes That I May See  
*"Open my heart illumine me, Spirit divine!"*
- 588 Have Thine Own Way, Lord  
*"Fill with thy Spirit till all shall see Christ only, living in me!"*
- 593 Lead Me, Lord  
*"Make thy way plain before my face."*
- 595 Be Thou My Vision  
*"Naught be all else to me, save that thou art."*
- 605 For Each Day of Life We Thank You  
*"Give us dreams and inner vision."*
- 622 Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah  
*"Let the fire and cloudy pillar lead me all my journey through."*
- 633 Lead On, O Cloud of Presence  
*"Our bondage left behind us, new hopes within us grow."*

Here are a few resources from The Chalice Hymnal that might be spoken in unison or read by one person as part of the group's corporate prayer:

- 243 Holy Spirit, Come  
256 She Who Makes All Things New  
262 You Are the Work of God  
268 God Be In Me  
567 Waiting and Wrestling with God

## Chapter 7

# Other suggested Resources

### Books

- Barry, William A. *Paying Attention to God: Discernment in Prayer*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1990.
- Blackaby, Henry T. and Claude V. King. *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God*. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. New York: Harper and Row, 1954.
- Brenner, Bart L. *Finding God's Will in a Deliberative Body: Communal Spiritual Discernment and Decision-Making*. Detroit: Ecumenical Theological Center, 1993.
- Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Ed. John T. McNeil. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.
- Cassian, John. *Conferences*. Trans. Colm Luibheid. *The Classics of Western Spirituality*. New York: Paulist Press, 1985.
- Climacus, John, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell. *The Classics of Western Spirituality*. New York: Paulist Press, 1982
- Conroy, Maureen. *The Discerning Heart: Discovering a Personal God*. Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1993.
- Farnham, Suzanne, et al. *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991.
- Farnham, Suzanne, et al. *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991.
- Green, Thomas H. *Weeds Among the Wheat: Where Prayer and Action Meet*. Notre Dame, IN.: Ave Maria Press, 1984.
- Ignatius, of Loyola. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*. Ed. Robert Gleason. Trans. Anthony Mottola. New York: Doubleday, 1964.
- Job, Rueben P. *A Guide to Spiritual Discernment*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 1996.

- Johnson, Ben Campbell. *To Know God's Will*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1987.
- Loder, James Edwin. *The Transforming Moment: Understanding Convictional Experiences*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981.
- McKinney, Mary Benet. *Sharing Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision Making*. Allen, TX: Tabor Publishing, 1987.
- Morris, Danny. *Yearning to Know God's Will: A Workbook for Discerning God's Guidance for Your Life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House 1991.
- Morris, Danny E. and Olsen, Charles M. *Discerning God's Will Together: Spiritual Practice for the Church*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Publications, 1997
- Olsen, Charles M. *Transforming Church Boards Into Communities of Spiritual Leaders*, Bethesda, MD: Alban Publications, 1995.
- Origen, *On First Principles: Being Koetschau's Text of the De Principiis*. Translated by G. W. Butterworth. Torchbook ed. New York: Harper and Row, 1966
- Rogers, Frank. "Discernment" in *Practicing our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. Dorothy C. Bass, ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.
- Stevens, Garrie, Pamela Lardear and Sharon Duger. *Seeking and Doing God's Will: Discernment for the Community of Faith*. Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1998.
- Thomas a Kempis. *Of the Imitation of Christ: the Classic Guide to the Spiritual and Moral Life*. New York: New American Library, 1957.
- Wicks, Robert J. *Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers*. New York: Paulist Press, 1995.

## Videos

- Danny Morris. *Personal Discernment*. Available from Worshipful Work 17000 NW 45 Hwy., Kansas City, MO 64152, (816) 880-0586.
- Danny Morris. *Corporate Discernment*. Available from Worshipful Work 17000 NW 45 Hwy., Kansas City, MO 64152, (816) 880-0586.
- Danny Morris. *Biblical Citings For a New Kind of Church*. Available from Worshipful-Work 17000 NW 45 Hwy., Kansas City, MO 64152, (816) 880-0586.
- Prayerful Discernment in the New England Conference*, a video that chronicles a discernment process in a judicatory involving 1200 persons. Available from U.M.M. Council on Ministries, PO Box 249, Lawrence, MA. 01842-0449.

## Training opportunities

“Worshipful-Work” provides seminars to train people to lead in discernment process. Worshipful-work,  
P.O. Box 10557, Kansas City, MO 64188-0557.

Phone: (301) 392-6227. E-mail: [worshipful-work@comcast.net](mailto:worshipful-work@comcast.net).

Web-site: <http://www.worshipful-work.org>.

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## Footnotes:

1. *anakrasis* (n) insight, perception, seeing the meaning behind and idea in Gerhard Kittel. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967).
2. *diakrasis* (n) separation, differentiation, distinguishing especially good from evil in Kittel.
3. *kritikos*(n) judgment, call to account, power of moral discrimination, *anakrino* (v)to investigate, try to get at the truth, to examine in Kittel.
4. Frank Rogers. ADiscernment@ in Practicing Our Faith. Dorothy Bass Jossey Bass ed. (San Francisco: Bass Publishers, 1997), 110.
5. Ignatius of Loyola, Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works (New York: Paulist Press, 1964).
6. Alexander Campbell, The Christian System (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1839) 24
7. Campbell, 18.
8. From a statement made by Robert Kreider, Mennonite historian, at an evaluation session for Worshipful Work as reported by Charles Olsen in Transforming Church Boards (Alban Publications: Bethesda, MD, 1995), xv.
9. The style of “worshipful work” is outlined in detail in the book Transforming Church Boards Into Communities of Spiritual Leaders by Charles M. Olsen (Bethesda, MD: Alban Publications, 1995).
10. Ideas from Cathy Myers Wirt, co-Regional Minister for Oregon region of Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).
11. Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen. Discerning God’s Will Together (Bethesda, MD: Alban Publications: Bethesda, MD, 1995), 75.
12. Suzanne G. Farnham et al. Listening Hearts. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing) 46-47.
13. This model borrows from the process outlined in Discerning God’s Will Together by Charles Olsen and Danny Morris 65-93 and from James Loder’s Phases of Life Transition as outlined in The Transforming Moment: Understanding Convictional Experiences (San Francisco: Harper and Row 1981) 97-112.
14. Frank Rogers, 106.
15. Rose Mary Dougherty. Group Spiritual Direction (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 41.
16. This exercise is adapted from Chuck Olsen. Transforming Church Boards Into Communities of Spiritual Leaders, 64.
17. Idea from Cathy Myers Wirt.
18. Adapted from Chuck Olsen. Transforming Church Boards Into Communities of Spiritual Leaders, 64-65 and from an exercise in Discerning Your Congregation’s Future, by Roy Oswald and Robert Friedrich, Jr. 69-71.
19. Idea from Ellen Morseth, Worshipful Work Staff, Kansas City.
20. Idea from Ellen Morseth.
21. Idea from Sr. José Hobgood.
22. In its classic form, this exercise is called “Lectio Divina.”
23. Idea from Cathy Myers Wirt.
24. Olsen. 70-71.
25. Peter Senge et al. The Fifth Discipline Field Book (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 273-275.
26. Senge, 55-57.
27. Idea from Cathy Myers Wirt.
28. Tilden Edwards, Living in the Presence (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 105.