

## *The Practice of Communal Discernment*

### **The Challenge**

Godly people coming together to make a decision seems like an innocuous task. It is, however, fraught with challenges. The more weighty the decision, the greater the challenge.

To believe the primary task is to get everyone on the same page is naive because it does not take into account the complexities of being human: expectations, fears, motives, intellect, personality, tradition, ego, power, needs and preferences. Then, add into the mix congregational needs, diversity of opinions, theological tension and the weight increases upon leaders.

Communal discernment by an elder group is a spiritual task dependent upon men who are maturing in Christ, who are rooted in communal prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit. Discernment, at its core is about judging, assessing, and evaluating.<sup>1</sup> The Holy Spirit is active in and through disagreement as well as agreement.<sup>2</sup> Discounting emotions and intuition by not bringing them to bear in the discussion (even without an apparent clear rationale) can hinder process and sabotage decision-making. The reason is that unexpressed feelings often take the form of unstated resistance or postponing a decision in the name of gathering more information. Courage to take a stand: state belief, express feelings and/or share intuitively is an essential part of the process.

### **The Conversation Commitments**

1. Everyone speaks.
2. Everyone speaks without interruption.
3. Everyone speaks in first person (*I think, I believe, I feel, etc.*)
4. Everyone checks what they heard by saying, "I heard you say...." and gives opportunity for the speaker to verify or clarify.
5. Everyone takes a position and provides rationale for their position in the discussion.
6. When conversation is at a stalemate, a timeout for silence, reflection, prayer or simply a physical break is OK.

### **Process Guidance**

An outside facilitator is advised for the first time working through the process. It cannot be overstated that THE PROCESS itself is essential for healthy discernment. Each part of the process is deliberate and has a purpose in group dynamics. An outside facilitator provides objectivity and active listening. This person can also provide insights into dynamics of engagement, disengagement, pain, body language,

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 5.14 (distinguish (NRSV/NIV); Phil 1.10 (determine (NRSV); discern (NIV).

<sup>2</sup> The Jerusalem Conference is a case in point of God working in and through disagreement-- "*The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate...*" (Acts 15.6-7, NRSV). The Greek words for debate (noun: argument, controversy, discussion) and (verb: to discuss, argue) communicate the nature and intensity of the Jew-Gentile issue. The decision to accept the Gentiles and send a letter to Antioch shows the presence of the Holy Spirit in the process-- "*For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials...*" (Acts 15.28).

etc. The tendency to “let’s just cut to the chase,” or “let’s just put it on the table” and ignore some details often subverts the task of discernment and keeps the group stuck.

*IF an outside facilitator is not used, then designate a person in the group to coach them through the process with someone who is an experienced facilitator.*

### **The Process**

The following process is designed as a reflective practice of communal discernment. It acknowledges that church leaders make decisions at many levels in varying degrees. Often, leaders can be united at a theological level, yet vary greatly at the pastoral and personal levels. The key to good process is conversation commitments, honest conversation, processing rationale, and identifying high and low consensus for expanded conversation, new questions, and implications. The goal is not for everyone to be in the same place, but rather in the same range.

### **Essential Process Tasks for Every Participant**

1. CLARITY: Writing out answers for clear thinking and rationale.
2. VERBAL SHARING: Articulating thoughts and feelings is about taking ownership of beliefs.
3. ACTIVE LISTENING: Eye contact and focus communicates value and engagement.

### **Some Individual Reflections for Group Meeting**

*(Write out your responses for sharing)*

The following questions are designed to till the soil of your thinking and willingness to be fully present in the process. Sharing your answers with each other at the beginning of the meeting is essential. Some of these questions may not be necessary depending on the nature of the discussion (i.e., searching for a preacher, theological position of leadership, building program, etc.)

1. What did others give up for me to be present for this process?
2. What crossroads is \_\_\_\_\_(congregation or group) facing at this time?
3. What possibilities for ministry exist in your local context?
4. What refusal am I postponing?
  - What am I refusing to say, “Yes” and “No” to?
5. How am I contributing to the problem I am concerned with?
6. What commitments am I willing to make for the future of \_\_\_\_\_?

## The Process Steps

1. Identify the key issue and state as a central question.
2. Individuals respond independently to the question at three levels (Theological, Pastoral and Individual) and provide succinct rationale.
3. Reproduce the levels on a white board for recording responses where everyone can see.
4. Each person shares their response and rationale one level at a time recording his or her numeric location on the white board
5. A time of silence (5 minutes minimum) for personal reflection and implications is given for each person to make notes, consider additional questions of clarification, etc.
6. Numbers are totaled and averaged for group consensus at each level and then, cumulatively.<sup>3</sup>
7. Identify the points of divergence and restate rationale inclusive of intuitive considerations.  
*\*Consider an acceptable range for group consensus in moving forward.*
8. If the group remains stuck, restate the question, take a few minutes for prayer and call for another consideration of numeric positions and rationale.

*\*At this point, acknowledging fears, congregational pressure (specific people and/or constituencies), possible member and/or financial loss, and family dynamics, that may impact position/rationale.*

9. Consider using this process with key trusted, mature, opinion leaders within the church as partners in this discernment process if needed.
10. Once there is a consensus, affirm the person(s) with the greatest divergence as essential to the process and pray for *“unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”* (Eph 4.3).

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<sup>3</sup> The numeric component factors are merely indicators for conversation and not absolute in the sense that conversation may change one's position. This is part of the process and I believe how the Holy Spirit is present.-GDK

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The Specific Issue/Proposal (state as a question) \_\_\_\_\_

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### **A. Theological/Mission/Kingdom Level (What does God want?):**

1 - Opposed    2- Serious    3- See Pros    4- In Favor, with    5- In Favor  
Reservations    and Cons    some hesitation

**My Rationale (reasons for my position):**

### **B. Pastoral/Congregational Level (Among our membership):**

1 - Opposed    2- Serious    3- See Pros    4- In Favor, with    5- In Favor  
Reservations    and Cons    some hesitation

**My Rationale (reasons for my position):**

### **C. An Individual Level (Your own mind, heart and conscience)**

1 - Opposed    2- Serious    3- See Pros    4- In Favor, with    5- In Favor  
Reservations    and Cons    some hesitation

**My Rationale (reasons for my position):**