

## Appendix

### Prepare the Way of the Lord

Trinity UMC Advent Study Week One

November 28/December 2 2007

*A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." (Isaiah 40:3-5)*

*I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to graven images. Behold, the former things have come to pass, new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them. . . . Who among you will give ear to this, will attend and listen for the time to come? (Isaiah 42:8-9, 23)*

**We prepare the way of the Lord by "attending and listening."** This is known as *discernment*. The purpose and goal of spiritual discernment is knowing and doing God's will. Discernment is seeing as God sees.

*At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." Solomon replied "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil . . . It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, 'Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind...I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life" (1 Kings 3:5, 9-14).*

**There are three preconditions to discernment:**

1. A relationship of open communication with God.
2. A desire to know the will of God.
3. A commitment to doing the will of God.

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2)*

### **Assumptions Of The Group Discernment Model:<sup>17</sup>**

For the model to work well, each participant must . . .

1. Be sufficiently mature in the Lord to seek God's will with integrity.
2. Possess sufficient emotional health, and be honest with personal dynamics, wounds and personal agendas.
3. Be able to communicate Christianly-truth in love, courage with tact.

*Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:29-32).*

*Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone (Colossians 4:6).*

4. Be grounded sufficiently in the Word of God.

*Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews. 4:12).*

*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).*

5. Have some practical experience in listening to the voice of the Spirit.

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<sup>17</sup>Christ Center Community Church. *Spirit-Led Decision Making and Group Discernment Model*, [online] accessed 1 August 2007; available at <http://www.christcenter.cc/spiritled.htm>

6. Be able to distinguish "soulish" emotion from spiritual prompting.
7. Be currently walking in the Spirit, manifesting His fruit.
8. Be able to trust the Holy Spirit in ministry colleagues.
9. Be able to know when to hold firm and when to concede graciously.
10. Be open to Spirit-led alternatives and/or wise modifications to mitigate concerns.
11. Be open to others addressing possible "blind spots."
12. Total confidence that God in fact rules in the affairs of people.

*Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me. The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever (Psalm 138:7-8).*

### **Cautions Regarding The Group Discernment Model**

1. Emotional dynamics, such as pride, stubbornness, humiliation, hypocrisy, etc.
2. Addiction to the process, slowing and complicating simple decisions.
3. Minority domination of decision-making process.
4. Second-guessing decisions properly discerned in other authorized leadership settings.
5. Focusing on negatives (checks) while obscuring positives (confirmations).
6. Forcing input when God, in fact, may not yet be speaking to the issue.

## Example of Discernment in Acts 1:12-26

12Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. 13When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

15In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, 16“Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— 17for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.” 18(Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. 19This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) 20“For it is written in the book of Psalms,

‘Let his homestead become desolate,  
and let there be no one to live in it’;

and

‘Let another take his position of overseer.’

21So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.”

23So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. 24Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen 25to take the place in this ministry and apostleship

from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” 26And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

This passage provides a context for us to discuss the ten stages within the discernment process (From *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* by Danny Morris and Charles Olsen):

1. **Framing** identifies the focus for discernment of God's will. The matters to be included are arranged into a unified whole. The focus of the exploration is briefly described. (v. 15-20)
2. **Grounding** in a guiding principle jump-starts the process of discernment. The guiding principle is informed by the values, beliefs, and purpose of the discerning community. Boundaries are set. (v. 21-22)
3. **Shedding** lays aside ego, preconceived notions, false assumptions, biases, and predetermined conclusions so that persons involved in discernment can openly consider the matter. (v. 14)
4. **Rooting** in the tradition connects religious and biblical stories, themes, and images with the situation at hand. The tradition may confront, confirm, nudge, or even transform the direction of the discernment process. (v. 20)
5. **Listening** enables hearing the promptings of the Spirit of God, the voices of all in the discerning community, and the needs of others who may be affected by our discernment. (v. 23-25)
6. **Exploring** frees our playful imaginations to identify possible options and paths that lie within the guiding principle. (v. 23)
7. **Improving** works in consultation and prayer to improve each option under consideration until it becomes the best that we can imagine it to be within the yearning of God. (v. 23)
8. **Weighing** sorts and tests the options or paths in response to the leading of God's Spirit. (v. 23)
9. **Discerning** brings the explorations to a conclusion, moving toward the selection of an option which is given weight by the Spirit of God and the process in which the community is engaged. (v. 26)
10. **Resting** tests the decision by allowing it to rest near the heart to determine whether it brings primarily feelings of consolation (a sense of peace and

movement toward God) or desolation (distress and movement away from God). (v. 26*b*)

### **Seven-Step Group Discernment Model<sup>18</sup>**

1. Information — Offer the issue in a clearly worded question; then decide how to decide, e.g., consensus? (Framing.)
2. Explanation — Give adequate context for the issue, communicate alternatives, and desired outcomes. (Grounding, Rooting.)
3. Clarification — Answer any questions for clarity; specify assumptions and brainstorm alternatives. (Exploring, Improving, Weighing.)
4. Prayer — Welcome Christ as head and ask for wisdom; wait in faith for spiritual wisdom.

*If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord. For the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord (James 1:5-8).*

5. Listening — Facilitating the "Group Discernment" process, the leader draws out everybody's insights. (Listening, Shedding.)
6. Consensus — The process of synthesis and testing continues, until the group discovers "mind of Christ." (Discerning.)
7. Obedience — Follow this principle: "If God speaks clearly, we will obey courageously." Thank the Lord! (Resting.)

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<sup>18</sup> Christ Center Community Church. *Spirit-Led Decision Making and Group Discernment Model*, [online] accessed 1 August 2007; available at <http://www.christcenter.cc/spiritled.htm>



**Prepare the Way of the Lord**  
Trinity UMC Advent Study Week Two  
December 5/9 2007

**Exploring Discernment through Scripture.**

1. Discernment engages hearing. Elijah stood in the entrance to a cave and felt the earth shake and saw the lightning flash and finally, in the “sound of sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:12), heard the voice of God. Discernment didn’t come in the display of God’s pyrotechnics, but in the hearing of a voice.
2. Discernment engages sight. God sent Samuel to select one of Jesse’s sons to be king. When he saw Eliab, he thought, “Surely the Lord’s anointed is now before the Lord.” But God told Samuel not to rely on outward appearances: “The Lord does not see as mortals see, they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:6-7). He looked over seven sons and could find no king among them. Then young David was brought in from tending the sheep; and Samuel recognized the heart of David, a future king.
3. Discernment engages speech. Moses was not eloquent, but God gave Aaron his brother to speak for him. And God said to Moses, “You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you should do. He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him” (Exodus 4:15-16).
4. Discernment recognizes the presence of God. Jacob wrestled all night with an emissary of the Lord. When morning came, Jacob, who was slow to discern, said, “Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And there he blessed him” (Genesis 32:29).
5. Discernment is distinguishing good from evil. Solomon asked for “an understanding mind . . . to discern between good and evil”; and God gave Solomon a “wise and discerning mind” (1 Kings 3:9-12)

*I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you. (Ephesians 1:17-18a).*

## Shedding Exercise<sup>19</sup>

The *shedding* stage of the discernment process is often the most challenging. Therefore it may be helpful to learn a simple technique for releasing our biases, presumptions, feelings, etc. Many times when we are faced with biases, preconceived notions, etc. we block them internally by

“closing [our] heart, closing [our] mind, and by pulling [ourselves] into a restrictive place inside. . . . Basically, we are programmed to open or close based upon our past experiences. Impressions from the past are still inside of us, and they get stimulated by different events. If they were negative impressions, we tend to close. If they were positive impressions, we tend to open. . . . The ultimate trick is not to close. If [we] don't close, [we] will have learned how to stay open. Do not let anything that happens in life be important enough that you're willing to close your heart over it. . . . [you keep your heart open] by relaxing and releasing. You do this by not buying into the concept that there is anything worth closing over. . . . Nothing, ever, is worth closing your heart over.”<sup>20</sup>

### Choosing to Let Go

Make yourself comfortable and focus inwardly. Your eyes may be open or closed.

*Step 1:* Focus on an issue that you would like to feel better about, and then allow yourself to feel whatever you are feeling in this moment.

Ask yourself: ***What is my NOW feeling about this topic?***

This doesn't have to be a strong feeling. In fact, you can even check on how you feel about this series of classes and what you want to get from them.

*Step 2:* Welcome the feeling, as well as any sensations, sounds, thoughts, and pictures that arise with the feeling, and allow whatever you are experiencing to be here as fully or as best you can.

Ask yourself: ***Could I allow myself to welcome this feeling?***

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<sup>19</sup> Hale Dwoskin, The Sedona Method Course, (Sedona: Sedona Training Associates, 1996-2007), 22-24.

<sup>20</sup> Michael A. Singer, The Untethered Soul, (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2007), 43-47.

Simply do the best you can. The more you work with this process, the easier it will be for you to identify what you are feeling and allow it to be here.

*Step 3:* Ask yourself: ***Could I let this feeling go?***

This question is merely asking you if it is possible to take this action. "Yes" and "no" or are both acceptable answers. As best you can, answer the question with a minimum of thought, staying away from second-guessing yourself or getting into an internal debate about the merits of that action or its consequences.

*Step 4:* Ask yourself this simple question: *Would I?*

In other words: ***Am I willing to let go?***

Again stay away from debate as best you can. If the answer is "no," or if you are not sure, ask yourself: "Would I rather have this feeling, or would I rather be free?" Even if the answer is still "no," go on to Step 5.

*Step 5:* Ask yourself a simpler question: ***When?***

This is an invitation to just let it go NOW. You may find yourself easily letting go. Remember that letting go is a decision you can make any time you choose.

*Step 6:* Repeat the preceding five steps as often as needed until you feel free of the particular feeling with which you started this process.

**Note:** If you are having a hard time deciding to let go or simply feeling a difference, then you can also give yourself permission to hold on for a moment. If you give yourself permission to do what you are already doing, you will find that it becomes much easier to make a new decision. The letting go, resulting from giving yourself permission to hold on, may even happen quite spontaneously. Once you have given yourself permission to hold on, then you can go back to asking yourself to let go. This will usually make getting to a genuine "yes" and the corresponding letting go much easier.

You will probably find yourself letting go a little more on each step of the process. The results at first may be quite subtle. Very quickly, if you are persistent, the results will get more and more noticeable. You may find that you have layers of feelings about a particular topic. However, what you let go of is gone for good.

## Example of Discernment in Acts 11:1-18

1Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. 2So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, 3saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" 4Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, 5"I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. 6As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. 7I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' 8But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' 9But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' 10This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. 11At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 12The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. 13He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; 14he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' 15And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 16And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" 18When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

In small groups discuss the following questions (you may wish to read Acts 10 for more background):

1. How would you *frame* the issue in this passage?
2. What do you see as the *guiding principle* in this passage?
3. Where do you see *shedding* in this passage?
4. How does Peter *root* the issue in this passage?
5. Where do you see *listening* in this passage?
6. Do you see *exploring, improving or weighing* in this story?
7. How does *discernment* take place in this story?
8. Where do you see *resting* in this story?

## Practice Seven-Step Model Discernment Issue at Trinity UMC.

1. Information/Framing: Would it be beneficial for all church committees/teams to meet on the same day, for example Sunday afternoon, followed by the church council? May we consider this as a matter for discernment in order to reach consensus?
2. Explanation: What is the desired outcome? Alternatives? Suggested guiding principle (grounding): good stewardship of members' time. Rooting in scripture: "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time" (Ephesians 5:15-16). Other suggestions?
3. Clarification: Questions for clarity? Playfully explore possibilities and options. Brainstorm.
4. Prayer: Welcome Christ as head and ask for wisdom; wait in faith for spiritual wisdom.
5. Listening/Shedding: What needs to die in me/us in order for Gods gifts and direction to find room in our lives? The process requires each of us to look inside ourselves and ask questions about why we are advocating a certain position. What are my assumptions? Prejudices? Everyone has the opportunity to share their thoughts, reservations, expectations, assumptions, etc. concerning the issue without comment from other members. The goal for each of us is to be able to genuinely say, ***"I am indifferent to everything but God's will."***
6. Consensus/Discerning: Spend 15 minutes in silence, praying over the various options. After the time of quiet solitude, ask if they are ready to close or if they need more time to pray, reflect, repeat a step, or probe into an issue more thoroughly. Test for consensus.

When we talk about consensus, it doesn't necessarily mean everyone is in absolute agreement. Consensus can occur at three different levels. Everyone may not completely agree, but they can live with the decision.

- I agree

- I don't agree with everything — but I can live with it.
- I don't agree at all — but I can see that most do agree and I can live with it.

There is one level that means that consensus is not reached:

- I don't agree — and I can't live with it.

If there is anyone who cannot live with a decision, (i.e., we haven't reached consensus) then we return to more prayer to seek reshaping of our decision and to continue to seek unanimous consensus.

7. Resting/Obedience: Do we experience consolation or desolation? Do we have a sense of peace? What have we learned about the practice of discernment? When were we aware of God's guidance? "God's will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else."

**Prepare the Way of the Lord**  
Trinity UMC Advent Study Week Three  
December 12/16 2007

**Scriptural Exploration of Shedding**

17Later Samuel called all the people of Israel to meet before the LORD at Mizpah. 18And he gave them this message from the LORD, the God of Israel: "I brought you from Egypt and rescued you from the Egyptians and from all of the nations that were oppressing you. 19But though I have done so much for you, you have rejected me and said, 'We want a king instead!' Now, therefore, present yourselves before the LORD by tribes and clans."

20So Samuel called the tribal leaders together before the LORD, and the tribe of Benjamin was chosen. 21Then he brought each family of the tribe of Benjamin before the LORD, and the family of the Matrites was chosen. And finally Saul son of Kish was chosen from among them. But when they looked for him, he had disappeared! 22So they asked the LORD, "Where is he?"

And the LORD replied, "He is hiding among the baggage." 23So they found him and brought him out, and he stood head and shoulders above anyone else.

24Then Samuel said to all the people, "This is the man the LORD has chosen as your king. No one in all Israel is his equal!"

And all the people shouted, "Long live the king!"

(1 Samuel 10:17–24, NLT)

[Jesus said,] 3And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? 4How can you think of saying, 'Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye? 5Hypocrite! First get rid of the log from your own eye; then perhaps you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye. (Matthew 7:3–5, NLT)

13Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. 14Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. 15Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; 16for it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:13-16, NRSV)

16Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you? 17God will bring ruin upon anyone who ruins this temple. For God's temple is holy, and you Christians are that temple.

18Stop fooling yourselves. If you think you are wise by this world's standards, you will have to become a fool so you can become wise by God's standards. 19For the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God. As the Scriptures say,

"God catches those who think they are wise  
in their own cleverness."

20And again,

"The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise,  
that they are worthless."

(1 Corinthians 3:16–20, NLT)

### **Practice Seven-Step Model Discernment Issue at Trinity UMC.**

7. Information/Framing: Would it be beneficial for all church committees/teams to meet on the same day, for example Sunday afternoon, followed by the church council? May we consider this as a matter for discernment in order to reach consensus?

8. Explanation: What is the desired outcome? Alternatives? Suggested guiding principle (grounding): good stewardship of members' time. Rooting in scripture:

"Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time" (Ephesians 5:15-16, NRSV).

1Companions as we are in this work with you, we beg you, please don't squander one bit of this marvelous life God has given us. 2God reminds us,

I heard your call in the nick of time;

The day you needed me, I was there to help.

Well, now is the right time to listen, the day to be helped. 3Don't put it off; don't frustrate God's work by showing up late, throwing a question mark over everything we're doing. 4Our work as God's servants gets validated—or not—in the details. People are watching us as we stay at our post, alertly, unswervingly ... I can't tell you how much I long for you to enter this wide-open, spacious life. 12We didn't fence you in. The smallness you feel comes from within you. Your lives aren't small, but

you're living them in a small way. I'm speaking as plainly as I can and with great affection. Open up your lives. Live openly and expansively.  
(2 Corinthians 6:1-4, 12-13, TMSG)

Other suggestions?

9. Clarification: Questions for clarity? Playfully explore possibilities and options. Brainstorm.
10. Prayer: Welcome Christ as head and ask for wisdom; wait in faith for spiritual wisdom.
11. Listening/Shedding: What needs to die in me/us in order for God's gifts and direction to find room in our lives? The process requires each of us to look inside ourselves and ask questions about why we are advocating a certain position. What are my assumptions? Prejudices? Everyone has the opportunity to share their thoughts, reservations, expectations, assumptions, etc. concerning the issue without comment from other members. The goal for each of us is to be able to genuinely say, ***"I am indifferent to everything but God's will."***
12. Consensus/Discerning: Spend 15 minutes in silence, praying over the various options. After the time of quiet solitude, ask if they are ready to close or if they need more time to pray, reflect, repeat a step, or probe into an issue more thoroughly. Test for consensus.

When we talk about consensus, it doesn't necessarily mean everyone is in absolute agreement. Consensus can occur at three different levels. Everyone may not completely agree, but they can live with the decision.

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- I don't agree at all — but I can see that most do agree and I can live with it.

There is one level that means that consensus is not reached:

- I don't agree — and I can't live with it.

If there is anyone who cannot live with a decision, (i.e., we haven't reached consensus) then we return to more prayer to seek reshaping of our decision and to continue to seek unanimous consensus.

8. Resting/Obedience: Do we experience consolation or desolation? Do we have a sense of peace? What have we learned about the practice of discernment? When were we aware of God's guidance? "God's will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else."

**Prepare the Way of the Lord**  
Trinity UMC Advent Study Week Four  
December 19/23 2007

*Where are we on discerning the practice issue? Do we need more work on that?*

***When Ready, Move On to Bible Study:***

**Example of Discernment in Acts 4:18-31 (NLT)**

18So they called the apostles back in and told them never again to speak or teach about Jesus.

19But Peter and John replied, "Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him? 20We cannot stop telling about the wonderful things we have seen and heard."

21The council then threatened them further, but they finally let them go because they didn't know how to punish them without starting a riot. For everyone was praising God 22for this miraculous sign—the healing of a man who had been lame for more than forty years.

23As soon as they were freed, Peter and John found the other believers and told them what the leading priests and elders had said. 24Then all the believers were united as they lifted their voices in prayer: "O Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them— 25you spoke long ago by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor King David, your servant, saying,

'Why did the nations rage?

Why did the people waste their time with futile plans? 26

The kings of the earth prepared for battle;

the rulers gathered together

against the Lord

and against his Messiah."

27"That is what has happened here in this city! For Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate the governor, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were all united against Jesus, your holy servant, whom you anointed. 28In fact, everything they did occurred according to your eternal will and plan. 29And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give your servants great boldness in their preaching. 30Send your healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

31After this prayer, the building where they were meeting shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. And they preached God's message with boldness.

9. How would you *frame* the issue in this passage?
10. What do you see as the *guiding principle* in this passage?
11. Where do you see *shedding* in this passage?

12. How does Peter *root* the issue in this passage?
13. Where do you see *listening* in this passage?
14. Do you see *exploring, improving or weighing* in this story?
15. How does *discernment* take place in this story?
16. Where do you see *resting* in this story?

## Putting Discernment into Practice in Our Meetings

“Not every situation raises an issue of discernment. God is not likely to be concerned with whether someone drives the brown or the white car to work. Some items (approving the minutes, receiving a report) that come before the group are not issues for discernment. However, there are times (more often than we honor) when God’s will should be known and a response taken. Deciding whether an issue is a matter for discernment is itself a matter for discernment.”<sup>21</sup>

### *Our Guiding Principle*

The mission and primary function of the church is to make disciples for Jesus Christ. When a proposal comes before us for discernment, would enacting that proposal help us make disciples for Jesus Christ? A fundamental question to ask ourselves is, “Do we want to enact this proposal because it will bring people to our church so that we can help them do what God is calling them to do, or because it will bring people to our church so that they can help us do what we’ve already decided to do?”

### *Suggested Steps To Facilitate Our Meetings*

#### Before the Meeting

- Team/committee members send agenda items to the chairperson ten days before the meeting. The items should be identified as items for action, discussion, or information only. Action/discussion items should include the name of a contact person who members may contact to clarify the issue if necessary.
  - Action items are items requiring a decision by the team/committee. Action items may or may not be appropriate issues for discernment.

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<sup>21</sup> Danny Morris and Charles Olsen, Discerning God’s Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church, (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997), 43.

- Discussion items are items that do not have to be decided at this meeting but we want to start thinking about.
- Information only items require no action by the team.
- Chairperson compiles the proposed agenda items and sends them to team/committee members a week before the meeting for their review. If members have questions about action/discussion items the call or email the contact person for clarification.

#### At the Meeting

- The team prioritizes and decides how to handle the action items. Is there already a clear consensus? Do we take a vote? Is it a matter for discernment?
- If an item that is not submitted ahead of time is brought up at the meeting, the team decides whether to amend the agenda to include it at this meeting or table it until the next meeting.
- Action items are handled first, followed by discussion items and finally information only items.

### Reflections on Discernment Process<sup>22</sup>

Despite our desire and intention, the reality is that no process model or technique, nor any amount of openness can achieve our discernment for us. As Quaker Pat Loring writes, "There are...no rules in this matter of leadings and discernment. Leadings come from the mysterious depths of God, the indefinable, the unpredictable, whose ways are not our ways, who is clearly not running the universe like a business, an institution, a bureaucracy, a family, or anything else within our ken." This is true whether we discern as individuals or as communities. Even Ignatius of Loyola recognized that his Spiritual Exercises were only intended to help clear the way for God's invitations to be known but were no guarantee that any discernment would be given.

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<sup>22</sup> Bill Dietrich, Reflections on Corporate Discernment, Part 1, [online] accessed 10 December 2007; available at [http://www.shalem.org/resources/publication/newsletter/archives/2004/2004\\_summer/article\\_06](http://www.shalem.org/resources/publication/newsletter/archives/2004/2004_summer/article_06).

[Discernment] is pure gift, not the result of anything we can do or achieve. Embracing this basic reality is essential to understanding the deeper invitation of discernment both as individuals and as community. The essence of that invitation, as Thomas Merton said, is to join in the movement of the Spirit unfolding moment by moment, inviting us to participate in the dance of creation to bring about a world of shalom. . . .

Process can and does have its place in our discernment — to help support and honor our desire for freedom, our desire and willingness to join the Divine flow. To honor that desire, all we can do is offer our openness, our willingness, "our hearts, soft and tractable" as the prayer of St. Irenaeus goes, and hope that we stay awake and aware of the Spirit's often gentle nudgings.

Any process or practice which honors that desire to be open and receive the gift can thus have a place in our discernment. In a corporate context, these practices can lead us beyond our differences to claim our deepest common desire, that which draws us towards God and together in community, calling us to our common home in God's Spirit. Thus it can be very helpful to employ practices (often similar to those in Quaker practice) such as using silence to open meetings and after each person speaks, encouraging all persons to speak and to listen without judgment, and seeking a transcendent "sense of the meeting" (a deeper sense of God's desire for the group) versus mere consensus.

But while process can support our willingness, it can also subvert our freedom by creating subtle expectations that results will be forthcoming, especially if we have tied our process to a timetable. Here the wisdom of Quaker practice can be instructive in that we must also have the freedom not to make a decision if no clear discernment is given. This is certainly easier said than done in situations where we have carefully crafted schedules and elaborate processes based on defined deadlines and goals. The sheer weight and momentum of the time and effort involved can propel us towards a decision whether or not we have any real clarity. We can rationalize forcing a result simply because we are too attached to the process or too exhausted to consider extending it. We can't bear postponing a decision when what we're really being invited into may simply be a deeper listening and trust.

But what if the pressures of time or circumstance do subvert our process and we make a decision without a clear discernment? What if despite our best efforts there is no clear leading but we nevertheless decide to move forward to meet some perceived expectations? Here again, there is no real difference between our personal and communal discernment. Our stumbling missteps are nothing new to God, who still calls us home, offering compassionate guidance to us from moment to moment. For the call to discernment is never a one-time shot, but rather a life lived with God individually and supported in community.