

Doctor of Ministry Prospectus

Drew University
The Theological School
Mark W. Lansberry
December 11, 2007

**“Reclaiming Trinity United Methodist Church's Love for God and Each Other
through the Healing of Its Wounded Angel”**



Hugo Somberg: Wounded Angel, 1903. Ateneum Art Museum., Central Art Archives,
Photographer: Hannu Aaltonen.

Narrative of Concern/Opportunity

Trinity United Methodist Church in Las Vegas, Nevada, has had a traumatic past that would have destroyed many churches. All but three of Trinity's fourteen pastors (including associates) left under duress. The more egregious problems with pastors included drug use, suspected child molestation, pornography found in the pastor's office, neglect of pastoral duties to maintain a private pastoral counseling practice in Arizona, financial embezzlement, and an associate pastor undermining the senior pastor's leadership. Some pastors were merely ineffective and some were very autocratic, alienating the leadership of the church with their "my way or the highway" approach.

In addition to the problems with the pastors, there was financial embezzlement by one of the church preschool's directors; mishandling of restricted funds by the finance committee; and financial pressures as the result of an annual conference settlement with Pacific Homes, a failed retirement community in California. This understandably created mistrust and suspicion towards all of the church's financial dealings.

Even though the membership has remained remarkably stable in terms of membership and finances under the circumstances, there is a sense that the church is losing ground. There is a sense of being "stuck", of being unable to grow. As one member of the church puts it, "If we continue on as we are, we won't be here [in five years] with the current age of our membership."

Without their realizing it, the trauma of their past may have blinded the members of Trinity to the reality that the world has changed around them. Like Simba accepting Scar's narrative that his father's death was his fault in Walt Disney's movie "The Lion King", Trinity has accepted a narrative of blame for not achieving their goals. Understandably, they blame the annual conference for sending them lousy pastors. They blame themselves for failure to implement appropriate

programs. They blame those who have left because of conflict and disagreements. By focusing on who is to blame, they find themselves stuck, unable to move forward.

In order to reach its full potential for ministry and effectively reach the surrounding community with the good news of Jesus Christ Trinity must discover a new narrative. In “The Lion King” Simba allows the narrative given to him by Scar to determine his identity. With the help of Rafiki he experiences a vision of his father who reminds him to remember who he is, the son of a king and a king in his own right. It is when Simba allows the narrative of *who he is* to supersede the narrative of *who he was* that he is able to reach his full potential.

Like Simba, the members of Trinity have allowed themselves to be defined by the narrative of their past. To reach their full potential they must remember *who they are* – the people of God – and allow that narrative to supersede the narrative of *who they were*.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of the project is to guide Trinity to recover the biblical meta-narrative and gospel message that God saves God’s people and help create a sense of expectation at Trinity that God’s saving grace is at work in their midst. The project will invite the congregation to explore a theology of the “angel of the church” referenced in the Book of Revelation, chapters 2-3. Trinity might easily see itself like the church in Ephesus:

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and found them to be false; I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and 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. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To

him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” (Revelation 2:1-7)

The members are to be commended for their hard work and patient endurance. They have patiently suffered without quitting. But, like the church in Ephesus they must remember to love God and each other as they did at first. They have to come to mistrust each other and blame each other. It does look to some members as if their lampstand is in danger of being removed from its place among the churches. Even though they have worked hard and endured so much, they have been traumatized by the events in their past. Their angel, their soul has become sick as a result.

A great burden can be lifted from the members when they realize that it is the church’s angel who is wounded and sick, not the members themselves. This realization has the potential to cause a shift in thinking from blame and victimization to compassion towards the wounded angel. A key theme of the project is ministering to the wounded angel of the church.

In “The Lion King”, it is when Simba realizes the truth of the present reality of what he has become, as shown to him by Rafiki and Nala, that is he able to accept the challenge to remember who he was and discern the true nature of his calling. Similarly, Trinity members may lift up their present reality to the angel of the church and join in the struggle to discern its true calling. From the perspective of process theology, exposing the reality of what the angel has become allows the angel to choose whether to continue the habit of actualizing that reality or make a new choice to actualize God’s initial aim and live into the vision God intends. “Everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light” (Ephesians 5:13, NRSV). In the light the angel (the church) becomes aware of the reality which has resulted from the choices it has made and can begin to discern God’s vision. The church can become unstuck and move forward into that vision.

Scope of the Project

The project will be limited to the current and active members of Trinity United Methodist Church in Las Vegas, Nevada. With the leaders of the church I have identified Trinity as shifting from the Blue Performative Zone to the Red Reactive Zone in Roxburgh and Romanuk's Three Zone Model of Missional Leadership:¹

The organizational culture focuses on performing well what has been learned and proven to work. The primary values are not innovation but skilled performance of a regular pattern of habits and actions. A performative zone congregation grows not through connecting with the people in its context but through people switching from other congregations . . . a performative culture functions best in a stable, predictable environment; it is not organized to deal with discontinuous change.²

One of the characteristics of the performative zone congregation that has been prevalent at Trinity is that most in the congregation have "experienced a loss of overall shared vision. Although a few people can articulate the vision that formed the congregation, in the performative zone people focus on current programs and how their needs are being meet."³

Yet, as Bob Dylan reminds us, "The Times They Are A Changin'" and Trinity members are discovering that all the proven techniques they learned to do so well are not working any more. They have entered the reactive zone. "In the reactive zone, leaders work harder, for longer hours, and with fewer resources at what they have been doing all along. They find they must address ever more crises with little time to imagine alternatives."⁴

¹ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, The Missional Leader, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 40.

² Roxburgh, 45.

³ Roxburgh, 47.

⁴ Roxburgh, 49.

The members of the congregation have become frustrated with repeated efforts at defining and implementing a vision for the church. Visions have been developed, strategic plans approved by the church council/charge conference but the church has been unable to achieve the desired outcomes. The leaders and the members lack “the framework to address the challenge of adaptive change. In such a setting, the congregation feels as if it is drifting in an unknown, uncontrolled direction. They see that actions and strategic plans no longer bring expected results.”⁵ When asked to participate in a visioning process, some long time members said they weren’t interested because they had done that before and nothing ever comes of it. One member who is participating with the current visioning team affirmed, “Our weakness has been the failure to carry out any of the visions we have come up with before.”

The project is designed to help the members overcome this malaise by reframing their story in light of the biblical meta-narrative and offering a framework within which they might address the issue of discontinuous change. The project will take place between January 6, 2008 (Epiphany) and March 23, 2008 (Easter). There will be a preparation phase during December, 2007 (Advent), and an evaluation phase during April, 2008. The project will be developed according to the following outline:

I. Preparation Phase Advent (Nov. 28-Dec. 23)

Preparing the Way: A model for discerning God’s direction as a congregation will be studied each week during Advent. I will train the church leaders, chairpersons and committee members in a discernment process based on the ten stages of discernment identified by Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen in their book Discerning God’s Will

⁵ Roxburgh, 86.

Together⁶ and a seven-step process being used effectively at Christ Center Community Church in Fort Collins, Colorado.⁷ Further theological support and scriptural examples of discernment are taken from Luke Timothy Johnson's Scripture & Discernment, Decision Making in the Church.⁸ The church leaders will use this discernment process during their regular meetings during January, February and March 2008. Handouts used in this class are provided in the Appendix.

Purpose: Prepare the congregation for the project phase.

Desired Outcome: Introduce concept of discernment of God's plan rather than "our" plan.

Introduce the challenge of facing fear of a different future for TUMC.

II. Project Phase January 6 (Epiphany) — March 23 (Easter)

Purpose: To focus the congregation on ministering to the church's angel so the angel can discern God's vision for the church. Walter Wink reminds us that it is God through Christ who is the agent of healing for the angels of the churches, just as God through Christ is the agent of healing for individuals of their sin.

Only "the one like a human being" is able to change a church, and that one does so by means of indirection: by changing the angel of the church. This requires discerning the lineaments and characteristics of a church's angel. It means holding the present reality up before the one who is present in its midst for judgment or affirmation. It involves accepting and loving its present reality, however corrupt, just as one would any other sinner. Churches are like people: they do not change in order that they might be accepted; they must be accepted in order that they might change. If we accept and love the wounded angel, praying for a vision of its true potentiality (rather than imposing our own), and engaging with others

⁶ Danny Morris and Charles Olsen, Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church, (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997).

⁷ 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>.

⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, Scripture & Discernment, Decision Making In The Church, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

in the struggle to discern the true nature of its calling, then the whole congregation may move toward it organically. We must do everything we can to foster change, and we can do nothing. God calls us to transform the church, and yet only God can bring that transformation about. God sends us to proclaim the word, and we are utterly free of any responsibility to make the word effective. When we can live within that paradox without incredulity, we will discover that God is indeed the real sovereign of the world.⁹

My project is directed toward creating an environment in which God may heal the wounded angel/soul at Trinity.

Desired Outcome of the Project Phase: To achieve an attitude of openness and receptiveness to God's message.

A. Sermon series on Sunday mornings — *Listening to the Spirit*.

1. January 6 *The Wounded Angel* Revelation 10:1-20

Each church has an angel. When the angel is healthy, the church is strong. Seven is a complete number so the “seven churches” represents the church universal, which has been wounded in different ways. Christ seeks to heal the Church by healing the angels of the churches.

2. January 13 *Remembering Our First Love* Revelation 2:1-7

Christ’s message to the church at Ephesus calls us to remember our first love—God. We love God because God first loved us. This is also baptism of the Lord Sunday, which gives us an opportunity to affirm our baptism and acknowledge our first love.

3. January 20 *Do Not Be Afraid* Revelation 2:8-11

Through the message to the church at Smyrna, Christ tells us not to be afraid of any suffering we have to endure for his sake. This is a reminder that God is the God who saves God’s people. Our present sufferings/challenges are not the end of the story.

4. January 27 *A New Name* Revelation 2:12-17

⁹ Walter Wink, Unmasking the Powers, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 81.

Our name represents our character, our nature. In Christ we are born again, we receive a new character. Through repentance we allow Christ to transform us through the renewing of our minds and receive our new nature.

5. February 3 *Hang In There!* Revelation 2:18-29

There are so many things in our culture to distract us from following God. It can even look like evil is winning. We are called to remember that God is the God who saves God's people and hang in there, trusting that God has the final word.

6. February 10 *Strengthening the Church's Angel* Revelation 3:1-6

Christ calls us to strengthen our angel by renewing our faith in Jesus Christ. When we trust in Christ we find new strength for living effectively as disciples. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Christ is the one who heals and strengthens us but we must have faith in him.

7. February 17 *The Door is Open* Revelation 3:7-13

Christ has opened a door for us that no one can shut. We have an opportunity to be faithful and reach the community of Las Vegas for Jesus. We are assured of protection and given the promise that nothing can take that opportunity away from us. God is not finished with us yet.

8. February 24 *Rekindling the Fire* Revelation 14-22

Christ warns us not to let the fire of our faith go out. We must not become lukewarm. We are to do whatever it takes to get ourselves fired up once more. Jesus is at the door knocking. It's up to us to let him in.

9. March 2 *Beyond the Pit* Genesis 37:18-28; 50:14-21

The story of Joseph repeatedly reveals how God redeems God's people from the challenges of this world. When we look for it we see God's gracious activity everywhere.

10. March 9 *Despair to Delight* John 11:1-45

Jesus tells Martha: I am the resurrection and the life. "Am," not "will be." The question, "What happens to us when we die?" ceases to be relevant in the presence of

Jesus. The important issue becomes, instead, "What happens to us while we live?" And this question takes center stage because, in Christ, living is all we will ever do.

Purpose: To recover the biblical narrative and gospel message that God saves God's people and create a sense of expectation at Trinity for God's saving grace to be at work in our midst. To help the congregation to:

1. Understand the Angel of the church (Revelation 2-3). In his "Powers Trilogy" Walter Wink argues that the church itself is an actuality with a personality and spirit of its own. It is this spirit that is referred to in the Book of Revelation as the "angel of the church":

Through the angel, the community seems to step forth as a single collective entity or Gestalt. But the fact that the angel is actually addressed suggests that it is more than a mere personification of the church, but the actual spirituality of the congregation as a single entity. The angel would then exist in, with, and under the material expressions of the church's life as its interiority. As the corporate personality or felt sense of the whole, the angel of the church would have no separate existence apart from the people. But the converse would be equally true: the people would have no unity apart from the angel. Angel and people are the inner and outer aspects of one and the same reality.¹⁰

G. Lloyd Rediger draws on the quantum sciences understanding of energy "as the source and substance of everything we know, use, and are" to explain how a congregation can have a soul:¹¹

The omnipresence of spiritual energy automatically makes any persistent gathering of persons seeking God into a spiritual entity greater than any one member. And since spiritual energy is by definition creative, such a group has spiritual characteristics we can

¹⁰ Wink, 70.

¹¹ G. Lloyd Rediger, The Toxic Congregation, How to Heal the Soul of Your Church, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 13.

associate with God's presence within any person; namely, it has a soul, creative potentialities, interactive reproduction (ministries), and a nurturing response to being. . . Primarily, there are healthy souls, sick souls, and transitioning souls. In simple terms, a congregation's soul is not a nebulous shrouded bevy consisting of all the souls of parishioners. Rather it is a composite spiritual presence that can be felt, nurtured, or contaminated. And it can be notably perceived by the results of its presence.¹²

This understanding of the church as having an angel or a soul (or the angel of the church having a soul) may be very helpful in providing a new perspective on Trinity's narrative.

2. Remember that God is the God who rescues God's people. While the overarching theme of the series is drawn from the messages to the angels of the churches in Revelation 2-3, other scriptures will be incorporated in the series to help the congregation and the angel of the church recall the many ways that God rescues God's people in the scriptural narrative. By indwelling the scriptural narrative Trinity may once more remember that God is the God who saves God's people. "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18, NRSV). God is the God who is continually bringing order out of the chaos of people's lives. "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28, NRSV). And that God often works through the least likely (from a human viewpoint) to accomplish God's purposes. Joseph thrown into a pit and abandoned by his brothers is saved and rises to power in Egypt, second in command to Pharaoh himself. "And Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt'" (Genesis 41:42, NRSV). In

¹² Rediger, 14.

his new position Joseph is able to forgive and rescue the very brothers who threw him into the pit.

3. Begin to look for what God is already doing in our community. By recalling and indwelling the meta-narrative of scripture Trinity members may begin to explore together how God might be using the traumas they have experienced to rescue the community of Las Vegas.

- B. All church committees will use the discernment model presented and Studied during the Advent preparation phase for the three months of January, February and March.

Purpose: To shift the focus of meetings from decision-making (what we want) and managing of scarce resources (what we can't afford) to one of discerning God's vision for the ministry of the church and restoring trust that God is able to provide the resources necessary to implement that vision.

Desired Outcome: To provide nurturing and enablement of spirit-led, courageous leadership behavior to meet the challenging environment of "discontinuous" change that is above and beyond the management behavior being used to accommodate "continuous" change.

- C. Five-Week Lenten study – February 13 – March 12 — Ministering to the Angel at Trinity

Purpose: To explore concrete ways that each member can contribute to healing the wounded angel of the church in light of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The text for the class will be Emmet Fox's commentary on the Sermon on the Mount.¹³ Fox interprets Jesus' classic teaching as a practical manual for spiritual growth. He emphasizes the need to be mindful of God's presence in our lives. His commentary reinforces the process of discernment by teaching us how to practice the presence of God in our lives and allow God to direct our activities. We do this by shedding our preconceived notions, prejudices, ideas, etc. and opening ourselves to hear God speaking to us. The class will attempt to address and treat the causes of the wounded angel rather than the symptoms.

1. Week One, Feb. 6/10. The Beatitudes (p. 1-46 in Fox's book). Challenges us to become "poor in spirit"—to get rid of love of money and property, of fear and public opinion, and of the disapproval of relatives or friends. To no longer be overawed by human authority or cocksure of our own opinions; to be ready to start again at the very beginning and learn life anew.

2. Week Two, Feb. 13/17. As a Man Thinketh (p. 47-84 in Fox's book).

Challenges us to really live the Christian life.

If you understand and accept the teachings of Jesus; and if you make every effort to practice them in every department of your own daily life; if you seek systematically to destroy in yourself everything which you know should not be there, things such as selfishness, pride, vanity, sensuality, self-righteousness, jealousy, self-pity, resentment, condemnation, and so forth—not feeding or nourishing them by giving in to them, but starving them to death by refusing them expression; if you extend the right thought loyally to

¹³ Emmet Fox, The Sermon On The Mount, The Key to Success in Life, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1938).

every person or thing within your ken, especially to the people or things you dislike; then you are worthy to be called *the salt of the earth*.¹⁴

3. Week Three, Feb. 20/24. Treasure in Heaven (p. 85-117 in Fox's book). Fox points out the necessity to keep our prayers "alive." "Merely to repeat a phrase mechanically as a parrot does (vain repetitions) is of no use at all. When praying, one should be constantly 'feeling out,' making himself receptive (not negative, but *receptive*) to Divine inspiration."¹⁵
4. Week Four, Mar. 2/5. By Their Fruits (p. 118-142 in Fox's book). Fox reinforces the need to be in harmony with God in our spiritual lives. "The only true way of bringing about anything is by the Practice of the Presence of God. This is the only way in which permanent results can be obtained. Temporary alterations in conditions may be achieved by will power, but they are only temporary, and sooner or later anything that seems to have been accomplished in this way will disappear again, leaving everything worse than it was before."¹⁶
5. Week Five, Mar. 9/12. The Lord's Prayer (p. 147-184). Fox unpacks the Lord's Prayer and makes it come alive. Through his treatment of the prayer he recaps his teachings throughout the book. "We must never for a moment try to live for ourselves, or make plans or arrangements without reference to God. . . if we seek to serve self instead of God, we are ordering trouble, disappointment, and unhappiness. . ."

¹⁴ Fox, 48.

¹⁵ Fox, 94.

¹⁶ Fox, 138.

Desired Outcome: To turn Trinity's vision toward the future rather than the past, toward healing rather than sickness and victimization, towards God's community rather than needs and preferences of individuals or small groups.

III. Evaluation Phase — April 1 – April 30, 2008.

Purpose: To provide Lay Advisory Committee feedback on my project leadership through inception, development, execution, and evaluation. To provide critique and lessons learned for Drew faculty representatives during Site Visit.

A. Church Leaders (Team/Committee members) will be asked for feedback on the discernment process.

How well did it work?

Did it create a different feeling/attitude/spirit in the meetings? If so, what was different?

What did they like about the process? What did they dislike about the process?

Would they like to continue using the process for their meetings?

B. Congregation will be asked to provide responses to the sermon series.

What did they find helpful in understanding the mission/ministry at Trinity?

What effect do they perceive the sermon series has had on the spirit or angel of the church?

C. Members who participate in the Lenten Bible Study will be asked for feedback on the study.

What did they gain from the study?

What did they learn that they could apply in their own lives and contribute to the health of the church's angel?

Desired Outcome: To generate a documented assessment of areas of effectiveness and an assessment of the spirit and health of Trinity. To help Trinity leaders formulate a plan for a path forward and series of next steps to continue the discernment process.

**Doctor of Ministry
Project Timeline**

Preparation Phase
Nov. 28 - Dec. 19

Project Phase
Jan. 6 - Mar. 23

Evaluation Phase

January

February

March

April

All Committees Use
Discernment Process
in Meetings
(Committee Chairs)

Evaluate
Effectiveness

(Pastor Mark / Lay
Advisory
Committee /
Church Leaders)

Listening to the Spirit
Sermon Series
(Pastor Mark)

Pastor Mark trains
Committee
chairpersons
in discernment model

Lenten Study (Pastor Mark)

Bibliography

Barna, George. The Habits of Highly Effective Churches. Ventura: Regal Books, 1999.

This book is about how to have a holistic, church-based ministry in which people's lives are revolutionized through the assistance of their church. Barna identifies six dimension of ministry that constitute a complete church: worship, evangelism, Christian Education, community among the believers, stewardship and serving the needy. Understanding the habits of effective churches may suggest areas for discernment at Trinity.

Chandler, Steve. Reinventing Yourself: How to Become the Person You've Always Wanted to Be, Franklin Lakes: Career Press, 2005.

Chandler has an excellent discussion of the victim personality, which offers insights into the victim mentality at Trinity.

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>.

This website presents the church's seven step method for discernment and decision making. This is a very helpful step by step procedure to guide a group in discerning God's will.

Cobb, Jr., John B. and David Ray Griffin. Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976.

Cobb and Griffin masterfully explain Process Theology based on the work of Charles Hartshorne in developing Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy for theological understanding.

Cosgrove, Charles H. and Dennis D. Hatfield. Church Conflict: The Hidden Systems Behind the Fights, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.

The authors apply family systems theory to conflict in the church. Helpful in understanding the dynamics at Trinity.

Covey, Stephen R. Principle Centered Leadership, New York: Fireside, 1990.

Covey discusses the importance of allowing our leadership and decisions to be guided by principles such as those outlined in his 7 habits book. The book is very helpful in explaining the need for shedding in the discernment process.

Covey, Stephen R. The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People, New York: Fireside, 1989.

Covey offers sound advice on how to be more effective by being proactive rather than reactive. His principle of “seek first to understand” is a useful tool for teaching the need for openness in authentic dialogue.

De Mello, Anthony. Awareness, The Perils and Opportunities of Reality. New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1992.

De Mello challenges us to “wake up” and be present to ourselves and others. Has strong chapters ask questions challenging us to examine our assumptions, motives, etc. that connect well with the shedding step of the discernment process.

Dwoskin, Hale. The Sedona Method. Sedona: Sedona Press, 2003.

This book offers a very simple technique for letting go of emotions and thoughts that block our ability to be objective in the present moment. This is an excellent resource for teaching the idea of shedding in the discernment process.

____ The Sedona Method Course. Sedona: Sedona Training Associates, 2007.

This is the companion workbook to the Sedona Method Audio Course and The Sedona Method Book. The book offers worksheets and exercise that can be done by groups or individuals to learn the releasing method taught in The Sedona Method.

Easum, Bill. A Second Resurrection, Leading Your Congregation to New Life. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007.

Easum’s latest book emphasizes the importance of the spiritual life of the congregation in turning the church around. For effective turn-around to occur, members’ spiritual life and behavior needs to be molded and modified to the point that they care more about the people in the surrounding community than they care about themselves.

Edmondson, Richard W., ed. A History of Trinity United Methodist Church. Las Vegas: 1988.

Very good history of Trinity United Methodist Church from its founding in 1963 through it’s 25th anniversary.

Edmondson, Richard W. A History of Trinity United Methodist Church, Las Vegas, Nevada, July 1, 1988 – June 30, 1993. Las Vegas: 1993.

This is the sequel to the author’s 25th anniversary history. This volume covers the next five years.

Farnham, Suzanne G., Stephanie A. Hull, and R. Taylor McLean. Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations, Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1999.

Hull and McLean discuss the benefits of using discernment in groups and teach the skills necessary to develop for an effective discernment process.

Griffin, David Ray. God and Religion in the Postmodern World. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.

In this book, Griffin explains the value of Process Theology for understanding God in a postmodern culture. His explanation of the way of higher-order beings are developed (in process theology) supports Walter Wink's concept of the church angel as such a higher-order being.

Hahn, Celia Allison. "Uncovering Your Church's Hidden Spirit." *The Clergy Journal* 83, no. 8 (July/August 2007): 14-15.

Good article on the soul or spirit of a church and how to identify it. The article offers more support for the idea that each church has an angel or spirit of its own.

Johnson, Luke Timothy. Scripture & Discernment, Decision Making In The Church. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983.

Johnson gives a strong theological foundation for discernment and shows how discernment was the decision-making method used in the early church. He also discusses how the church might use scripture and discernment to think together about difficult issues in the church such as homosexuality.

Leas, Speed B. Leadership & Conflict. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982.

In this excellent book on leadership and conflict, Leas points out two powerful dynamics that are probably at work in the leader and in the congregation: the tension between the needs for dependence and independence and fear. Being aware of how fear is affecting us and how it is likely to be affecting others is useful in developing strategies/techniques for decreasing the tension so everyone can more full use their "best selves" in the decision making process.

Morris, Danny E. and Charles M. Olson. Discerning God's Will Together, A Spiritual Practice for the Church. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997.

In this book Morris and Olson give an excellent discussion of the value of discernment and identify ten stages that groups go through as they discern together. Offers scriptural foundation and compares discernment with other forms of corporate decision making.

Rediger, G. Lloyd. The Toxic Congregation, How to Heal the Soul of Your Church. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007.

In this book Rediger develops Walter Wink's concept of the angel of the church, though he prefers to refer to the soul of the church rather than the angel. He categorizes the souls of different churches and offers helpful tips on healing the soul of a congregation.

Roxburgh, Alan J. and Fred Romanuk The Missional Leader, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006.

The authors give a very good analysis of the challenges facing the church in the transition from modern to postmodern culture. The authors present a three-zone model of the life-cycle of a church and a prescription for helping the church deal with discontinuous change.

Sahagun, Dan, Richard French, and the Trinity Church Staff, ed., Trinity United Methodist Church Celebrating 40 Years 1963-2003, Highlights of the past decade: 1993 to Present. Las Vegas: 2003.

This is an addendum to the earlier two histories of Trinity church. This one was prepared for the 40th anniversary and covers the years from 1993 to 2003.

Savage, Carl and William Presnell. Narrative Research in Ministry, Muskogee: Indian University Press, 2006.

Savage and Presnell show how narrative research can one to help understand the story of a church. They present the key idea that a new narrative can seize the imaginations of the people and allow them to move forward.

Singer, Michael A. The Untethered Soul. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2007.

This excellent book offers tremendous insights into spiritual growth especially with regard to shedding past conditioning and living in the present moment. Offers very accessible examples for members to relate to their own experience.

Stevens, Paul R. and Phil Collins. The Equipping Pastor, The Alban Institute, 1993.

This is an excellent resource that discusses leadership and systems theory for pastors.

Stewart, III, Carlyle Fielding. Reclaiming What Was Lost, Recovering Spiritual Vitality in the Mainline Church. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003.

In this book Stewart highlights eleven basic principles or steps to strengthen and reclaim God's church. He maintains that a new church leadership paradigm must consider the cultivation of ministries that are based on the psycho-socio-spiritual-cultural needs of specific communities. We must go back to the basics by emphasizing models of spirituality that meet the practical and social needs of people as well as modes of ministry that are contextually and culturally relevant.

Tolle, Eckhart, Practicing the Power of Now, Novato: New World Library, 1999.

Eckhart offers practical tips for living in and enjoying the NOW moment. He points out that a victim mentality believes that the past is more powerful than the present. This is helpful in leading Trinity leaders to embrace the present and let go of their past.

Wink, Walter. Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

_____. Walter. Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

_____. Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.

Walter Wink's masterful trilogy on the Powers is the inspiration for my project. He makes a strong case that what people in the world of the Bible called "principalities and powers" was in fact real. They were discerning the spirituality at the center of the political, economic, and cultural institutions of the day. The second volume in the trilogy, Unmasking the Powers was especially significant in the development of the project to heal the wounded angel of the church. Wink makes the case that the spiritual aspect of an institution (the powers) is not simply a personification, but exists as a real aspect of the institution whether personified or not.

Wisconsin Annual Conference The United Methodist Church. Learning Leaders Notebook: Building New Skills and New Connections for a New Time, [online] accessed 8 August 2007; available at <http://www.wisconsinumc.org/leadership/DecisionTable.html>.

This website raises the question of what would happen if the churches in the Wisconsin annual conference all used discernment to guide them. Discusses some of the discernment ideas presented by Morris and Olsen.

Wolf, Fred Alan. The Yoga of Time Travel, Wheaton: Quest Books, 2004.

Wolf draws on the science of quantum physics to explore the possibility of rewriting the past (time travel). His intriguing discussion complements the Narrative Research idea of an abductive narrative seizing the imagination and allowing a church to rewrite or re-imagine its story.

Zimmerman, Dennis L. Healing Death. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007.

Zimmerman offers a framework that allows people to use a person's death as a healing experience. For this project, chapter eight was especially helpful as a primer on family systems theory.

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:¹⁷

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.

¹⁷Christ 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 Model¹⁸

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.)

¹⁸ 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 Exercise¹⁹

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.”²⁰

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?***

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

²⁰ 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.

- 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.

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.”²¹

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.

²¹ 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 Process²²

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.

²² 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.

[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.