

Group Discernment: *Pursuing God's Will Together*¹

Discernment is the capacity to recognize the presence and activity of God. Paul says that we are transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we can discern what the will of God is, that which is good, acceptable, and perfect (Rom 12:2 ESV). Corporate discernment, then, is responding to the activity of God as a leadership group and to make decisions in response to that Presence. The heart of the discernment process is listening—to God, to each other, and to what's going on in the depths of our own souls.

When the New Testament believers clarified their question for discernment in Acts 15—do Gentiles need to be circumcised in order to be saved?—they couldn't rely on knee-jerk reaction ("Of course they need to be circumcised! That's what has always been required!") or their ability to think strategically ("Well, if we make membership requirements less strenuous, maybe more people will join the church!"). No, they wanted to understand what God was up to. So they listened: to the conversion experience of the Gentiles themselves; to respected believers witnessing these conversions; to the experts in Mosaic law; to Peter's perspective; to Paul and Barnabas's descriptions of signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles. The whole assembly listened to all of this in silence (a sign of respect).

In response to all he had heard, James expounded on Scripture, making the connection between the current phenomenon and the words of the Old Testament prophets. He connected the dots between Peter's testimony and the words of Amos, who described the trajectory of God's long-term plan: "And I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called" (Acts 15:17).

What James did was brilliant. He placed their situation within the larger story of God's purposes in the world. Then he dared to state what he felt God was saying in it all: that Gentiles did not need to become Jews (symbolized by the ritual of circumcision), but they did need to become God-worshipers, abstaining from immorality and activities associated with idol worship. This story illustrates that leadership discernment involves listening with love and attention (1) to the movement of the Holy Spirit in the world, (2) to Scripture, religious tradition, pertinent facts and information, and (3) to that place in us where God's Spirit witnesses with our spirit about those things that are true.

Here are the steps to that listening.

Set the agenda

One of the most important roles for leaders is often hidden: praying through and setting the agenda for leadership meetings. When discernment is the goal, the agenda needs to be set in such a way that the right information is available to the group before and during the meeting. The facilitator needs to make sure the necessary voices are heard and that there is plenty of space for prayer, listening, silence, and response.

¹ Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012) Reprinted from LeadershipJournal.net, Fall 2012.

Listen together

When the group gathers, reiterate the question for discernment and recount the circumstances that have brought this question to the fore. It might be something disturbing (a financial shortfall, a moral failing, lack of productivity, declining attendance) or something that feels like a work of the Spirit (an explosion of ministry growth, new opportunities, a potential partnership). Make sure everyone involved has the same information, is apprised of any new developments, and is clear that there are no secrets or hidden agendas.

Then, invite questions for clarification. Don't take it for granted that people know how to listen. We live in a culture where people are much more skilled at arguing their position than they are at engaging in mutually influencing relationships. The following are a few guidelines for entering into and maintaining a listening posture.

- 1 Become settled in God's presence.
- 2 Listen to others with your entire self (senses, feelings, intuition, imagination, and rational faculties).
- 3 Do not interrupt. And pause between speakers to absorb what has been said.
- 4 Speak for yourself, expressing your own thoughts and feelings and experiences. Avoid broad generalizations.
- 5 Do not challenge what others say. Rather, ask questions that enable you to wonder about things together.
- 6 Listen to the group as a whole—to those who have spoken aloud as well as to those who haven't. If someone hasn't spoken, feel free to ask what he or she is thinking. Some less assertive people have much to offer because they have been listening and observing.
- 7 Hold your desires and opinions lightly. Be willing to be influenced by others.

Notice without judging

The listening phase is to gather as much data as possible. Use the following to notice everything without judging.

Pertinent facts. Gather background information, financial reports and implications, pertinent research and statistics, actual proposals, advice from experts, etc.

Voices from the community. Listen to those affected by our decision, those who will carry out our decision, and those who have a special giftedness, experience, or expertise in the area we are discussing.

Listen with love and attention.

Direction and calling. What fits best with the direction and calling of God on this church or organization? (It can be helpful to review your mission statement here.)

Scripture. Is God bringing to mind Scripture that has direct bearing on what we are discussing? Do the larger themes of Scripture provide a context for this decision?

The life of Christ. Is there anything in the life and teachings of Jesus that informs our considerations? Does this decision reflect the mind of Christ as described in Philippians 2?

Fruit of the Spirit. Read Galatians 5:22-26. Which choice will nurture the fruit of the Spirit in our community?

Consolation and desolation. Which alternative brings us the deepest sense of life (Jn. 10:10), inner peace (Phil 4:7), freedom in the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17)? Which brings us a sense of wholeness, authenticity, congruence with who we are in God? Which choice fosters a deeper level of surrender to God and to love? Which would draw us away from God? Pay particular attention to distress, confusion, desolation. Even the more difficult emotions need to be acknowledged.

Tradition. Is there a guiding principle or deep wisdom in our faith tradition (particularly the wisdom and charism of our founders) that could give guidance?

Love and unity. Since our ability to love one another and to come together in unity is Jesus' desire for us, which alternative would foster the greatest unity among us? Since love is our highest calling, what is the most loving thing we could do—for God, for ourselves, for our brothers and sisters in Christ, for those we are called to serve?

These questions can be on-ramps to the discussions most fruitful for discernment. They are interconnected; one quite naturally leads to others.

Listen in silence

After you have listened together, there are several things that might happen, and silence is the appropriate response to all of them. One possibility is that a solution might start to become clear to the group and someone is able to name it. That's fine. Do not shy away from this, but don't rush to make this happen. Keep in mind, however, that "way opening" (as the Quakers would characterize it) is very different from brainstorming and working hard to come up with a human solution. If some clarity opens, receive it; it will be part of what everyone takes into silence. Silence will provide an opportunity for God to confirm it, reveal more, or raise additional questions and concerns.

Another possibility is that people will feel overwhelmed or confused by the complexity of the issues. This is uncomfortable but also wonderful! Don't fight this feeling. When the group feels the limits of its own wisdom and resources, it creates room for God to work. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3). The temptation is to keep talking at this point, but silence is the only place you should go with it. It takes discipline to call for silence when everyone is riled up.

Why silence helps

Silence helps us rest in God. Discernment requires self- and other-awareness as well as space for the Holy Spirit to work. Silence creates this space. In silence we become aware of our emotions, thoughts, experiences, sins, temptations, and attachments.

Most of all, silence leads us to an awareness of others and the gift they are to us—in our sameness and in our diversity. In silence we return to a place of honoring each other. Silence creates space to listen within for God's wisdom. In a normal meeting, allot fifteen to twenty minutes for silence. Let people leave the room to walk or find a place of quiet. If you are at the end of your allotted meeting time, ask people to take some time in silence before the next

meeting in order to listen to God.

In the movie *Of Gods and Men*, a group of French monks living in a country besieged by terrorists needed to discern whether to stay in the monastery and remain faithful to their vows, or leave in order to save their lives. It was an excruciating dilemma. Some felt strongly about staying, others disagreed, and some were undecided. All points of view were expressed with respect and restraint. As they entered into silence and prayerful listening, their leader dismissed them with these simple words, "Our help comes from the Lord," and the brothers responded, "Who made heaven and earth." What a perfect way to enter into silence—by affirming who and what we are seeking in the silence.

Reconvene and listen again

The words that follow these times of silence are often characterized by deeper wisdom and truer insight. The group will probably gather more quietly. Start by asking what happened for them and what God said to them in the silence. This question encourages group members to share what they noticed about themselves and what shifts might have taken place.

For instance, someone might say, "When I first went into the silence, I noticed that I was all riled up and had a hard time settling down. A part of me wanted to keep fighting and arguing. However, when I was able to let go of my desire to fight, God started showing me the ways I try to control outcomes rather than trusting him for what's needed. I realize now that it was because of my desire to be in control that I challenged so-and-so rather than really listening."

Another person might come back having experienced God's leading to consider a particular metaphor or passage of Scripture. Someone else may have an innovative funding idea that will help with the financial side of the question. We never know what will come from these times of silence, but something always does. At this point it is likely that a way forward begins to emerge. If so, the group moves to ...

Select an option in line with what God's doing

In some cases the way forward presents itself clearly, as happened in [Acts 15](#). After James described his own conviction that beyond the basics of abstaining from things polluted by idols and fornication, "we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God," the whole group affirmed this as God's way forward.

Discernment does not always come with as much clarity, but do not despair. When the way forward is not clear, select an option or two and seek to improve those options so they are the best they can possibly be.

Now the leader can summarize by clearly stating the options and inviting the group to respond. "Does the way I have stated the options accurately capture what we have discussed? Is anyone uncomfortable with proceeding to the next step?" If someone does express discomfort, make adjustments as needed.

Weigh the option(s)

The group now weighs the option(s) to examine what is most consistent with what God is doing among them. The Quaker tradition encourages folks to "place each path near the heart" to see if

it brings consolation or desolation. Does the Spirit of God seem to rest on this option? What is the fruit of this option? Other questions may be asked: Is there a Scripture that God brings to mind that is pertinent to the issue we are facing? What is God making natural and easy? What brings a sense of lightness and peace even in the midst of challenge? Is there an option that enables us to do something before we do everything?

Agree together

Once the group has thoroughly explored the options and dealt with any questions, clarity should begin to emerge. Hopefully, everyone will say, "To the best of our ability, we agree that this particular path is God's will for us. So this is the direction we will go." It is the leader's job to articulate "the sense of the meeting"—the conclusion to which God seems to be leading. Then the question is, Does this matter need more prayer and reflection? Or are we ready to close by agreeing together on the way forward?

Ask whether each member affirms that the articulated path seems to be God's will. This step is extremely important because it allows each person to speak on the matter so the group can move forward in unity. It safeguards the unity of the group by avoiding future arguments about whether there really was agreement. It also prevents anyone from sowing seeds of doubt later on by saying, "Well, I wasn't really sure, but I didn't want to say anything."

Whatever successes come as a result of this decision, everyone celebrates together. And whatever challenges come, everyone faces those together. There can be no finger pointing and blaming. Whatever we did, we did it together.

That said, there are several levels of agreement that can signify unity of spirit:

- Everyone in the circle unequivocally agrees.
- "I agree but with some reservation; however, I have expressed my reservations and feel I have been heard by the group, so I can go forward in peace."
- "I don't agree, but I feel comfortable deferring to those who have particular wisdom, who are most affected, who have greater certainty."
- "No, I don't agree and cannot go forward. In order for me to agree, we will need to go back to the drawing board, wait and pray."

All of these responses are respectful of the group and give priority to unity of spirit even when there might be differences of opinion. When someone who is respected in leadership (and hopefully all members of the group are) communicates doubt, this will send the group back into discernment mode. Do not see this as a sign of failure. See this person's thoughtful resistance and willingness to speak the truth as a gift. This can spur the group on to fine-tune their discernment, or it might be seen as a potential safeguard against an unwise decision. At the very least there is something God still wants to reveal to the group through this person's inability to agree.

If the new direction has been confirmed in each person's spirit, then move forward by affirming the decision in the group and within the wider community. The fact that leaders have taken such care to discern God's will in unity should be a cause for great celebration in the larger community!

Test For Indifference

Are you indifferent to anything but the will of God? Ask God to show you where you might be attached to anything other than God's will. If you are indifferent, thanks be to God. If not, don't judge yourself; just notice it honestly and with compassion. Ask: What needs to die in me for the will of God to find room in my life? What do I need to let go of in order to receive some new gift of God?

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