

## **Biblical/communal Discernment: What are the necessary components?**

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One of the most important factors in Biblical/communal discernment is to find a trusted person who can lead the process. Various authors designated this individual as a moderator, a clerk, or perhaps a discernmentarian. In their book *Practicing Discernment Together*, Fendall, Wood and Bishop dedicate several helpful chapters to the role of the leader.

In contrast to most Free Church scholars regarding the nature of group discussion, George Schemel and Judith Roemer make considerable room for resident (or designated) authority. They hold that when a group *cannot* or *will not* come to a consensus, the responsibility for making the decision rests with the designated authority. Perhaps this *modus operandi* reflects the more hierarchical nature of the Roman church than the more egalitarian nature of the Free Church. Especially when there are differing assumptions about governance, there must be a good understanding on the nature of authority in the group to engage in a healthy discernment process.

Schemel and Roemer outline seven essential elements to communal discernment, several of which may be conceived of as steps in a process. The precedent for their process is drawn from the experience of Ignatius of Loyola and his companions as they formed the Society of Jesus. While this represents a Roman Catholic view of spirituality, the method has been adapted and utilized by churches in the Free Church tradition.

The essential elements include 1) An explicit attitude and atmosphere of faith, 2) Prayer: before, during, and after for light and purification, 3) Interior freedom: poised spiritual liberty, 4) Information: disseminated, assimilated, 5) Formulation of the Issue [for discernment] into a simple declarative sentence and the separation into con and pro reasons, 6) Attempt at consensus, and 7) Confirmation (congruence) is both the internal and the external.

The first three elements are considered to be habitual modes of mind and heart. They are part of the group's lifestyle rather than something it does quickly on the morning of a decision. The next three elements belong to the more formal part of the discernment process. The last element—congruence—is monitored in the group over time. It may take weeks or months, perhaps more than a year, as the new decision is worked out and tested.

In their book *Discerning God's Will Together*, Danny Morris and Charles Olsen offer three different images to help create mental models for discernment. They are 1) a series of stepping stones, (2) a set of spirals around the magnetic core of God's will, and (3) a grain field.

Morris and Olsen build on these three images with a series of ten steps to engage in discernment. Briefly explained, the steps are: (1) *Framing*. This step involves the choice of a matter for discernment, and a focus on how to approach it. (2) *Grounding*. To get the process started, a clear and concise statement will be drafted by the planning team and offered to the group. Small groups form "community" through storytelling and affirmation of the gifts individuals bring to the group. They also help to secure clarity about the way in which the group's values come to bear on the subject for discernment. (3) *Shedding*. Persons spend time in silent reflection—to name the baggage, investment or passions each brings to the issue. They will be asked to

consider what they will have to release so that the group can come to a state of indifference to anything but God's leading. Participants will also be asked to identify any unique concerns of the religious body they represent in anticipation that those concerns may be laid aside and the group can come to corporate indifference. (4) *Rooting*. The plenary group makes biblical and historical connections with the matter to be discerned. Biblical scholars talk about the themes, images and stories from Biblical tradition, and pose questions for the small groups to consider. (5) *Listening*. The stories of individuals, congregations, or traditions are shared, although not as advocacy speeches. Small groups meet again to discuss the stories and to continue to explore the tradition. (6) *Exploring*. After quiet individual reflection and prayer, groups begin exploring the various paths that God may offer. Each group considers possible options. Options are shared with the larger group. (7) *Improving*. Options are offered to small groups for improvement. After a time of solitude, each person is invited to share how each path can be improved so that each is the best it can be. (8) *Weighing*. Participants remain in small groups. They are asked to be silent and to allow the Spirit to rest on each path. After silent prayer and reflection, group members report on where the Spirit has led them. (9) *Closing*. Each group leader tests for consensus or explores various ways to conclude the discernment. A person from each group may speak to the assembly of the wisdom of their group. This is not a debate, but a sharing of wisdom. The method of concluding should have the approval of the assembly. (10) *Resting*. The Moderator records the results of each step on the chart, seeking the consensus of the assembly.

Most of the writers on discernment urge groups to work toward some kind of process of coming to consensus, rather than making a decision by debating and then voting. However, Schemel and Roemer caution groups against trying to "form" or "forge" a consensus. Instead, the aim of the discernment process is to read the consensus that is already in the group.

While it is not explicitly stated in most sources, it seems as though pain or confusion are often an incentive to engage in a discernment process. When life is flowing along in a normal fashion, few people will be willing to invest the time that is needed to engage in Biblical/communal discernment. While pain can be an incentive to engage in a process, it may also hamper the process, especially if the pain is hidden or unacknowledged.

### Table and plenary discussion

As you look over the processes outlined in this paper, what stands out to you? How might your congregation or area conference benefit from the use of such a process?

Think of a time when you were part of a group that engaged with a discernment process that turned out well. What were the factors that led to a good result?

Think of a time, if any, where a discernment process did not turn out well. What were the factors that led to a negative result?