

Biblical/communal discernment: Practicing discernment together

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There are many different processes or steps that one can use to engage in group discernment. The most informal processes simply involve two or three gathered together in the name of Jesus, with a matter for discernment before them. For larger groups, such as our CLC, it is helpful to follow the steps of a more carefully defined process. Four of the processes that I find most helpful are outlined in the following works. I can heartily recommend each of these works to you.

1. Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church by Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen
2. Communal Discernment by George J. Schemel and Judith A. Roemer
3. Practicing Discernment Together: Finding God's Way Forward in Decision Making by Lon Fendall, Jan Wood and Bruce Bishop
4. Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups by Ruth Haley Barton

For this session of the CLC, the Executive Board has proposed the following matter for practicing discernment: To what extent does CLC support the updated draft of the Membership Guidelines for use across Mennonite Church USA? After discernment on this question, a secondary matter for discernment will follow: Should the updated guidelines be submitted to the 2013 delegate body for approval? These matters involve complex issues to consider as we engage in discernment.

I propose that we use the steps laid out in Schemel and Roemer's work as we pursue God's will regarding these two matters for discernment. We reviewed the seven steps in a previous handout. I propose that we now practice these steps in regard to the matters for discernment stated above.

Again, 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.

As noted in the earlier handout, 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. I trust that these modes are at least partly at work in each of us as members of the CLC.

We will begin with step four above—Information that is disseminated and assimilated. The information regarding the membership guidelines was sent to you as part of the docket. We will review it briefly in this session.

We will proceed with step five— Formulation of the Issue [for discernment] into a simple declarative sentence and the separation into con and pro reasons.

The matter for discernment may be framed as a positive and declarative sentence or proposition: The membership guidelines as updated and approved by the Executive Board in its September meeting should be implemented as the best policy for Mennonite Church USA to use for the foreseeable future. And then we will examine the pros and cons of implementing the proposition.

After a period of prayer as a table group and then in the plenary group, we will name every valid reason why we might say “no” to this proposition. Each one will speak only for him or herself.

After a period of prayer as a table group and then in the plenary group, we will name every valid reason why we might say “yes” to this proposition. Each one will speak only for him or herself.

Schemel and Roemer explain the reason for examining the cons first:

- “1) Historically, that is what Ignatius and his friends did.
- 2) Psychologically, there is much evidence to support the fact that negative reasons are hard to contain and color our opinions until they are said aloud. It seems best to lay them on the table early.”

It is helpful to allow the same amount of time for both “sides” of this question, even though there may be a period of silence.

We will then move to step six—Attempt at Consensus. This is a time to look over all of the pros and cons to see which are more compelling. It is a time when consensus may emerge by stating the proposition a bit differently to eliminate some of the reasons that were stated as cons.

The seventh step—to seek confirmation—comes through both prayer and action. It may occur over time.

If we reach a consensus on this first matter, we will go on to the second matter for discernment. It may be stated in the following proposition. The updated guidelines should be shared with the delegates at Phoenix for information, rather than voting, since there are not substantive changes.

We will follow the same procedure for discernment, examining the cons and pros, and then seeking consensus.