



# When Church People Disagree: Division or Discernment?

## SESSION 2

| *How can Christians live together faithfully in the midst of disagreement?*

### Discernment Defined

Discernment seeks to cultivate sensitivity to the presence of God. It involves a humble yielding of control, as we grow in sensing God's gracious, freeing presence. Discernment may be described as a means to

- recognize and acknowledge what God is doing and what God desires;
- see a situation from God's perspective;
- uncover, rather than make, a decision;
- listen to the Holy Spirit, who prays within and among us.

When the deepest desires of persons are aligned with God's deepest desires, life is marked by loving more freely, becoming dedicated to a larger goodness, and experiencing healing and reconciliation with God, oneself, and one another. That alignment should be consistent with the Word of God, as revealed in Jesus Christ through Scripture; build up the body of Christ; and lead to a sense of peace about decisions.

### Discernment and Parliamentary Procedure

Structured processes for communal discernment have been developed and used by several faith traditions. Communal discernment provides ways for a group to jointly study Scripture and pray together, engage in dialogue on an issue, allow multiple alternatives to be weighed with the mind and heart in a collaborative manner, and collectively sense what common direction

emerges. However, such a process is not needed for all decisions. Communal discernment would be more beneficial than parliamentary procedure when dealing with significant matters that affect the whole body, especially those about which there is current or potential conflict.



The table below indicates when each approach is most useful:

#### Parliamentary procedure is helpful when

- dealing with routine organizational business
- an issue has near or full consensus
- clear alternatives have been identified and further discussion is not likely to yield more options
- delaying a decision is not an option
- participants are comfortable with parliamentary procedure
- the group is willing to accept majority rule when a common solution cannot be found

#### Communal discernment is helpful when

- dealing with significant matters that affect the whole body

- a sizable minority or range of views is present
- more voices or ideas need to be included
- time can be taken to explore more options and build consensus
- a diversity of cultural backgrounds is present
- persistent and substantial division exists

For governing bodies that are accustomed or obligated to using parliamentary procedure, communal discernment can still be practiced. *Robert's Rules of Order* provides ways such a process can be utilized through means of less-structured deliberation by transforming the deliberative body into a "committee of the whole."

After using a discernment process, a group may return to the use of parliamentary procedure to formalize the outcome through a vote and record any dissent if requested.

## The Process of Communal Discernment

A facilitator leads a group through the steps of communal discernment by guiding the discussion, summarizing points, articulating when a consensus seems to be emerging, and bringing the group to closure. In large gatherings, multiple facilitators may work with smaller groups prior to the whole assembly making a decision. Training facilitators and participants in the practice beforehand is helpful.

### 1. Prepare

Communal discernment is most fruitful when individuals are already engaged in an ongoing practice of individual discernment. This includes living a life grounded in prayer and the study of Scripture; examining and reflecting on behavior, dynamics, and feelings; naming and questioning mental frameworks; and creating the time and space to be moved beyond themselves to encounter the expansive presence of God.

For effective communal discernment, members of the body need to trust God by being attentive to how the Holy Spirit is present in the midst of those gathered and by having faith in God's willingness and power to transform the situation. They need to choose to trust one another, believing that the Holy Spirit speaks through others as well as themselves. Participants would benefit from making a commitment to such principles through a covenant they develop early in their process.

## GUIDELINES FOR DISCERNMENT

- Gather good data and basic factual information, identifying alternatives and possibilities.
- Keep all possible options "soft" in order that creativity may contribute to the process.
- Maintain a holy indifference to the outcome, laying aside all biases and prejudices, leaving the outcome to God's direction, and being obedient to the results.
- Maintain a community and climate of worship.
- Ask and respond to the question, "Where have we sensed God's benediction in what we have been about?"
- Spend time in reflection and prayer, listening to God's intimations in the future, hints of God's direction.
- Share with the community what one has seen, heard, or felt in the reflection time, and listen for insight and wisdom in the dialogue.
- Remain humble—being aware God may be speaking through another person.
- Wait for God's timing, continuing to ask God for direction during the waiting or silence.
- Remember to keep a holy indifference to the outcome, willing to consider new ideas.
- When consensus begins to form, continue to offer all plans and commitment to God for reshaping.<sup>1</sup>

Participants also need to accept the grace to lay aside ego, preconceived notions, biases, and predetermined conclusions that may limit openness to God to reach "holy indifference." Holy indifference means being indifferent to all but God's will. It does not mean, "I don't care." Rather, it is surrendering one's certainties to give God space for something new. This includes expectations for when closure or consensus may be reached.

### 2. Establish a Common Starting Point

Participants need to have a consciously shared experience of their common calling in Christ. If members in the body don't know one another or have strained relationships, time needs to be given intentionally to building

community. Community can be strengthened by regularly engaging together in Bible study, worship, and celebration of the Lord's Supper and by personally praying for one another with thanksgiving and intercession. Sharing a sense of common calling may also be enriched through reflection on participants' common heritage as Christians, such as through the study of their faith community's history, theology, polity, and traditions. Naming some of the beliefs and values all can affirm is also helpful.

The focus for discernment needs to be identified clearly. What is the question or issue before the body? By what principles will the process be guided?

### 3. Gather and Share Information

Full information related to a possible course of action is critical for effective discernment. Data can be gathered by participants and drawn from people or fields beyond the group. Participants can be guided by wisdom from biblical texts, their spiritual heritage, and their own experiences as people of faith.

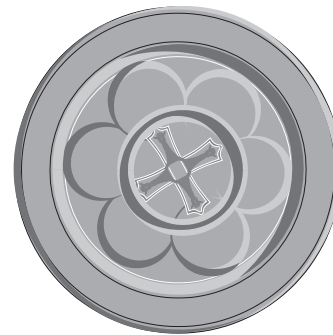
Listening enables receptivity to the promptings of the Spirit of God, the voices of all in the community, and the concerns of others who may be affected by the outcome of the discernment process. No individual possesses all of God's truth, and the contribution of each who has something to say is essential. Listening to the voice of others may take the form of reading articles by a variety of theologians and biblical scholars or reviewing data related to the question at hand. Listening to others could happen through focus groups, phone interviews, surveys, and encounters at other church gatherings. Listening to one another within the group can be helped with tools such as Mutual Invitation, Polarity Management, and silent prayer.<sup>2</sup> Additional information may need to be gathered after some options are generated.

### 4. Explore Options

Certain questions are helpful to test possible leadings of the Holy Spirit:

- Is this leading in keeping with the teachings of the Scriptures?
- Are there examples from the past that may provide direction for the present?
- Is a leading self-serving, or is it motivated by one's love for God and others?

- Does it matter who gets the credit?
- Is the ministry of Jesus being continued in what we do?
- Will the community benefit—will the outcome build up the body of Christ?



The group identifies possible options in response to the issue being discerned. A group may engage in brainstorming—naming a variety of creative ideas without making any evaluative responses. If many options result from the brainstorming, these can be limited to a workable number by having group members identify a few they want to explore further.

The group then weighs the options in response to the leading of God's Spirit. Persons spend time in silent prayer, reflecting on the negative aspects of each option, after which they share their thoughts as a total group. They next spend time in silent prayer reflecting on the positive aspects of each option, which are then shared as a whole group. After another period of prayerful reflection, the group senses whether a common direction is emerging. Stating the cons first does not put the pros into a privileged position but simply makes it possible to really hear them.

### 5. Choose Direction

Exploration concludes. The facilitator may send up a "trial balloon" that articulates where the Holy Spirit seems to be leading based on the group's input. Persons may be asked to indicate their level of support of the trial balloon through a straw poll. Levels of support could include the following:

- 5 – Strongly supports
- 4 – Agrees with reservation
- 3 – Has mixed support, for example, has questions or reservations but is willing to stand aside
- 2 – Is somewhat opposed and has concerns
- 1 – Is strongly opposed

Usually, if all participants are supporting at levels 5 and 4, consensus can be declared. If some are signifying levels 3, 2, or 1, more time usually needs to be taken to

respond to questions and concerns and possibly modify the option, direction, or timetable. Those who may be holding opposing views are called to distinguish between preference and conscience. If it is a matter of conscience, persons are encouraged to hold to their convictions as long as their convictions hold them, recognizing that the prophetic voice may come through the minority. If it is a matter of preference, participants are encouraged to release the matter to the group and not stand in the way of the group proceeding.

To a parliamentarian using *Robert's Rules of Order*, consensus means unanimity. But consensus in the framework of discernment does not mean that the outcome is a unanimous vote, that the result is everyone's first choice, or that everyone agrees 100 percent. It does mean that the views of all participants are encouraged and heard, all participants share the final decision, those who disagree are willing to support it, and all agree to be responsible for implementing the decision.

The World Council of Churches in its new decision-making procedures has defined consensus as

a process for seeking the common mind of a meeting without deciding issues by means of voting. A consensus is reached when one of the following occurs:

- 1) all are in agreement (unanimity);
- 2) most are in agreement and those who disagree are content that the discussion has been both full and fair and that the proposal expresses the general "mind of the meeting;"
- 3) the meeting acknowledges that there are various opinions, and it is agreed that these be recorded in the body of the proposal . . . ;
- 4) it is agreed that the matter be postponed;
- 5) it is agreed that no decision can be reached. Therefore, consensus allows any family or group of churches . . . to have their objections to any proposal addressed and satisfied prior to the adoption of the proposal.<sup>3</sup>

## 6. Rest with the Decision

Resting allows time for the decision to lie near the heart in a spirit of prayer to determine whether it brings pri-

marily feelings of consolation (a sense of peace and movement toward God) or desolation (distress and movement away from God). A group may decide to allow their decision to stand for a period of time before formally voting on and implementing it.

## If Consensus Is Not Reached

Sometimes a group does not reach consensus in the time allowed. Several options may be considered:

- Identify issues about which agreement has been reached.
- Identify issues that remain to be resolved at a later time.
- Identify possible steps for further exploration, perhaps by repeating some of the discernment process.
- Appoint a smaller group or person to make the decision.
- Vote by majority rule.
- Drop the matter.<sup>4</sup>

Though practicing communal discernment can be demanding, it can also provide a taste of the feast that all will share one day around the Lord's Table in the household of God.

## About the Writer

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## Endnotes

1. Developed by Bishop David J. Lawson and described in the appendix of *Ministry Inquiry Process*, published by the United Methodist Church's Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2005.
2. These tools are described in "Resources for Fostering Community and Dialogue" by Victoria Curtiss, available at <http://www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/finalreport.htm>.
3. "Interim Report on Consensus Procedures," World Council of Churches, Central Committee Meeting, Geneva, Switzerland, 28 August–2 September, 2003.
4. Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together—A Spiritual Practice for the Church* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997), 93.