

Listen! Tuning In to the Voice of God

An Invitation to a Year-Long, Congregational Practice of Discernment

“The silence of prayerful listening is not so much the absence of talk as it is presence to the Word.” ~Suzanne Farnham et al.

“Time constraints may lead busy people to rush to premature judgments.” ~Danny Morris and Charles Olsen

“Every experience [with communal discernment] has always led us to a conclusion that none of us anticipated.” ~Jeannette Bakke

“Faithful discernment can lead us into difficult and risky situations.” There are “two perpetually challenging elements in discernment: the prophetic cry and the cross.” ~Stephen V. Doughty

For Your Reflection:

What would it look like if our church were a community where attention to the Spirit was central and discernment characterized everything our church did?

What is God’s prayer in me for the world?

What is God’s prayer in us for our church, which speaks to our world?

What is God’s yearning for our congregation?

Communal Discernment for the Community:*

There are many ways to go about discerning together for a group. It’s an art, a dance, with God, with one another, with the group’s particular context. The following is less of a step-by-step process, and more of an artist’s palette or a set of dance steps that can be put together to create something original and beautiful. Movement among these is free, going back and forth between steps, sometimes going around in circles.

This process may happen in many different settings, over different time frames, for large and small decisions or directions. It could happen in a ministry team meeting in the course of a half hour. Or it might occur in the life of a whole congregation over a period of months or even years, involving many different gatherings, including many different groupings of people. It’s an art, not a formula!

- **Silence** - entering into silence together can clarify groups in ways nothing else can.
- **Images** - paying attention to images, visions, colors that come. This can open the way to deepening understanding of where God is moving the group.
- **Scripture** - rooting deeply in the Word of God, hearing the cries, experiences, and wisdom from scripture, including from Jesus and others who have experienced God’s call and presence.
- **Faith and life story sharing** - sharing with the group deepens bonds of trust, allows others to know how God has been working in group members already, how their understandings and concerns have been shaped by experiences, learnings, traditions, others.

- **Listening** - attending to and receiving what's being said (aloud and not) by others in the group, by the Holy Spirit, by oneself, and by those in the group's context crying out in need; allowing what you hear to affect, inform, shape, even disturb.
- **Prayer** - continuing awareness that this whole process is prayer, and also intentionally praying for and with one another and for the process, listening for God's prayer in us.
- **Holding a question over time** - living with an unanswered question as a traveling companion for an extended time, addressing it in a variety of settings, intentionally coming back to it, reviewing emerging answers, taking as much time as needed.
- **Clarifying the question** - stating and continuing to prayerfully refine the issue for discernment and decision.
- **Shedding** - naming attachments, preconceived notions, ready-made conclusions, and prayerfully laying them aside frees the group and opens it to the leading of the living God.
- **Gathering** - Seeking input on the issue from a wide variety of sources: scripture, tradition, diverse experiences and insights of faithful people, formal study on the issue and context.
- **Prayerfully sifting** - Sorting through all it has received through the process. Looking for emerging patterns of the Spirit, listening for God's voice and invitations coming through.
- **Speaking and testing the vision** - trying out God's emerging direction or vision; Prayerfully and honestly holding, examining, testing it; does peace come with it or just a sense of relief? does it feel complete and whole? are any important elements or voices being left out?
- **Stating the discerned vision** - after whatever time of testing is needed, stating and embracing the clear vision or direction God has given, inviting all to hear and embrace.
- **Giving thanks and going forth** - celebrating God's gracious guidance, giving thanks for the gift of direction and all the gifts along the way, following God's lead, and continuing to trust God's providence for living into what God has called the group to.

*This is written with a focus on our church community. All of this could be practiced in other groups in your life as well: your circle of friends, your partner and/or family, your neighborhood, your company or office (if appropriate), an organization you're part of, your small group, your ministry team, etc.

Book suggestion: *Discernment* by Henri Nouwen

*“For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him [or her]?”
But we have the mind of Christ.” ~1 Corinthians 2:16*