

Discernment and Decision-Making

The Reverend Victoria Grace Curtiss

Introduction

Grappling with the Scriptures convicts our hearts. Singing hymns lifts our hope. Stories of our ancestors of faith engender strength. Respect grows as voice is given to the unspoken. Scales fall from our eyes with fresh understanding. Praying evokes repentance. Listening makes space for one another. Dialogue generates new possibilities. Gratitude sighs as nods are shared. Strangers are kin around Christ's table. We discover ourselves standing humbly on common, sacred ground.

The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church¹ is one of many groups that has experienced such gifts of God's grace: the Holy Spirit worked in our midst, transforming us to love one another with all our differences. Who can say how this happens? You can hear the Spirit's sound, "but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it goes" (John 3:8).

The movement of God's Spirit cannot be predicted or packaged. Nor can any systematic method guarantee group unanimity at the deepest level. However, there are spiritual practices that can enable us to be more receptive and attentive to God and one another and help us discern the mind of Christ. One of the basic principles of Presbyterian polity is that "Presbyters are not simply to reflect the will of the people, but rather to seek together to find and represent the will of Christ."² This paper describes processes of communal spiritual discernment, which the task force and other bodies have found helpful, to assist the church as it seeks to be led by the Holy Spirit and to live into its call to embody the peace, unity, and purity that are God's gifts to us in Jesus Christ.

Discernment

Discernment seeks to cultivate sensitivity to the presence of God and a desire for the things of God.³ 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 result in a sense of peace about decisions.⁴

In Times of Conflict

In the United States, the Presbyterian Church has used parliamentary procedure as the primary means of making decisions since at least 1789.⁵ Governing bodies have been directed in the

¹ The task force was formed by action of the 213th General Assembly (2001) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to lead the church "in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity, in and for the 21st century."

² *Book of Order— the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Part II (2004-2005), G-4.0301d.

³ Adapted from a talk by Shaun McCarty, Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation.

⁴ See the Bible study on "Testing the Spirits" by Frances Taylor Gench in resources from the task force.

⁵ Language about parliamentary procedure is found in the original constitution of the Presbyterian Church.

42 Constitution itself since 1984 to use *Robert's Rules of Order*, and congregations have been
43 directed to use either that source or a comparable parliamentary authority.⁶

44 The church has used parliamentary procedure to good effect over the years. However,
45 parliamentary procedure has drawbacks, especially when used with an issue over which there is
46 considerable, conscientious disagreement. It tends to shape a body's deliberations in such a way
47 that members must take sides before considering carefully a full range of possibilities. Debate in
48 support of or opposition to a motion requires persons to take positions and tends to pit them
49 against one another as opponents. The temptation rises to dominate one's opponent, and the unity
50 of the body can be strained.⁷ A final vote may be taken without realizing that a significant
51 minority is in opposition.

52 *Historic Principles, Conscience, and Church Government*, adopted by the 195th General
53 Assembly (1983), states, "Schism is generally the result of an improper understanding or use of
54 Presbyterian polity." These factors may contribute to schism:

- 55 • "a governing body acts on crucial matters which affect the whole church, even with
56 proper authority, but without giving consideration to consultation and the slow process
57 necessary to aid in the building of consensus";
- 58 • "a governing body assumes the simple majority to be sufficient for taking action binding
59 on the conscience of a large minority."⁸

60 The Reverend Norman Shawchuck, after many years of working with churches in conflict,
61 believes that *all* effective management of conflict entails the following steps:⁹

- 62 1. Generate valid and useful information and share it with all the parties involved.
- 63 2. Allow free and informed choice—identify areas of agreement to enable parties to make
64 decisions collaboratively; and identify areas where there is not agreement, so that each
65 party may reach its own independent decisions, share those with the other party, and
66 collaboratively decide how to live and work together in spite of differences.
- 67 3. Motivate personal commitment to the agreements that are reached.¹⁰

⁶ *Book of Order*, G-7.0302, G-9.0302.

⁷ The Harvard Negotiating Project discovered predictable consequences of beginning debates by taking positions: "When negotiators bargain over positions, they tend to lock themselves into those positions. The more you clarify your position and defend it against attack, the more committed you become to it... Your ego becomes identified with your position... As more attention is paid to positions, less attention is devoted to meeting the underlying concerns of the parties. Agreement becomes less likely.... Positional bargaining thus strains and sometimes shatters the relationship between the parties." Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, 2nd Edition. (New York: Penguin Books: 1991), pp. 4-5, 6.

⁸ *Historic Principles, Conscience, and Church Government*, adopted by the General Assembly (1983), Office of the General Assembly, p. 16.

⁹ Norman Shawchuck, *How to Manage Conflict in the Church* (Leith, SD: Spiritual Growth Resources, 1994), pp. 46-47.

¹⁰ These steps were developed by psychologist Chris Argyris as an alternative to two basic strategies that communities rely upon when faced with situations perceived to be potentially threatening. In the first strategy, persons try to control or dominate the situation and those involved in it by achieving their own ends through winning. The second strategy seeks control by attempting to maintain relational connections, not hurt feelings, and trust that maintaining relationships will resolve difficulties. Both are evident within the PC(USA), as some seek to win a victory over others, and others seek to avoid anything controversial.

71 **Structured Communal Discernment**

72 Structured processes for communal discernment have been developed and used by several faith
 73 traditions.¹¹ Communal discernment provides ways for a group to jointly study Scripture and pray
 74 together, engage in dialogue on an issue, allow multiple alternatives to be weighed with the mind
 75 and heart in a collaborative manner, and collectively sense what common direction emerges. Such
 76 a process would be more beneficial than parliamentary procedure for a body to use when dealing
 77 with significant matters that affect the whole body, especially those around which there is current
 78 or potential conflict.

79
 80 The table below indicates when each approach is most useful:

Parliamentary procedure is helpful when	Communal discernment is helpful when
dealing with routine organizational business an issue has near or full consensus	dealing with significant matters that affect the whole body
clear alternatives have been identified and further discussion is not likely to surface more options	a sizable minority or range of views is present more voices or ideas need to be included
delaying a decision is not an option participants are comfortable with parliamentary procedure	time can be taken to explore more options and build consensus
the group is willing to accept majority rule when a common solution cannot be found	a diversity of cultural backgrounds is present ¹² persistent and substantial division exists

81
 82 *Robert’s Rules of Order* provides ways a communal discernment process can be utilized through
 83 means of less-structured deliberation by:

- 84 • transforming the deliberative body into a “committee of the whole”
- 85 • acting as a “quasi-committee of the whole”
- 86 • allowing “informal consideration” and “crystallization of opinion”¹³

87
 88 Within the PC(USA), many governing bodies already use these options to discern direction,
 89 develop ideas, and build consensus. But these options within *Robert’s Rules* are not as well
 90 known or as commonly used as the “motion/countermotion/amendment” option. The Presbyterian
 91 church would benefit in its discernment of God’s leading by increasing its use of options that
 92 “committee of the whole” offers and by employing some of the methods of communal
 93 discernment described in this paper.

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Chris Argyris & Donald Schon, *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective*, (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1978).

¹¹ Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), designed the communal discernment method that is the basis of the process described in this paper.

¹² Eric Law developed “mutual invitation” to draw forth fuller participation from persons from various cultural backgrounds. See “Resources for Fostering Community & Dialogue” (www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity).

¹³ *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised*, 10th Edition, Section 52: “Committee of the Whole and Its Alternate Forms.”

The Process of Communal Discernment

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Prerequisites

One of the foundational principles for the PC(USA) is “that all their decisions should be founded upon the revealed will of God.”¹⁴ John Calvin emphasized that piety, in which reverence and love of God are joined, is prerequisite to any true knowledge of God.¹⁵

To discern wisely, people need to be living a life grounded in prayer and the study of Scripture. Communal discernment benefits when individuals are already engaged in an ongoing practice of individual discernment. This includes 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, participants 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. The task force made a commitment to such principles through a covenant we developed and adopted at our first meeting.¹⁶

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 wrestling with the question, “Are we willing to let something die to give God room for something new?”¹⁷ This includes expectations for when closure or consensus may be reached. “In group discernment, we live from God’s movement, not our clocks and calendars. God speaks in peace, clarity, and usually slowly.”¹⁸

Steps of the Process

Several models are possible for structured communal discernment. What follows is an outline of the steps that the Theological Task Force used to good effect over the course of many meetings. But there is no one single method of communal discernment. It is employed here to illustrate how discernment processes could be utilized in our church’s decision-making. Ways to implement these dimensions of discernment are described below, as well as in the case studies in the appendices and in the resource, “Resources for Fostering Community and Dialogue,” found on the task force’s Web site: www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity.

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.

¹⁴ *Book of Order*, G-1.0307.

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), The Library of Christian Classics, Vol. XX, Book 1, Chapter 2, p. 39.

¹⁶ See “Covenant of the General Assembly Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church” (www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity).

¹⁷ Danny E Morris. & Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together*, Upper Room Books, 1997, pp. 78-79.

¹⁸ From a presentation by Stephen Doughty.

135 **1. Establish a Common Starting Point**
136 Participants need to have a consciously shared experience of their common calling in Christ. The
137 task force engaged in worship and Bible study daily,¹⁹ as well as celebrated the Lord’s Supper at
138 each meeting. We spent many hours reading about our common heritage and learning through
139 presentations on the history, theology, polity, and ecclesiology of the PC(USA).²⁰ We also
140 hammered out theological perspectives we all could affirm.

141
142 The focus for discernment needs to be identified clearly. The task force was given its mandate by
143 the General Assembly. It then developed a mission statement in light of that mandate. The
144 guiding principle for our work was “the promotion of the peace, unity, and purity of the church.”
145

146 **2. Gather and Share Information**

147 Participants draw on wisdom from biblical texts, their spiritual heritage, and their own
148 experiences as people of faith that illumine the matters to be discerned. Listening enables
149 receptivity to the promptings of the Spirit of God, the voices of all in the community, and the
150 concerns of others who may be affected by the outcome of the discernment process.

151
152 The task force read and analyzed numerous articles by a variety of theologians and biblical
153 scholars. We listened to the wider church through focus groups and workshops at General
154 Assemblies, conversations at synod consultations, presentations at presbytery and affinity group
155 gatherings, phone interviews and surveys, correspondence, and encounters with observers at our
156 meetings. We listened to one another and God’s Spirit through a variety of tools, including
157 mutual invitation, polarity management, graced communal history, prayerful listening, silence,
158 and taking the pulse.²¹ Once options were named, additional information was shared about
159 possible ramifications of implementation for each option.

161 **3. Explore Options**

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

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167 The group then weighs the options in response to the leading of God’s Spirit. The uniqueness of
168 the discernment model is that it allows.

169
170 Discernment differs from debate in that:

- 171 • time is given for silent reflection and prayer before each person offers his or her input,
172 and again after the whole group has shared
- 173 • participants work together as one body, all reflecting on the negatives and then the
174 positives of an option.

175
176 Two tools to weigh options are “negatives, then positives” and “option by option.” With
177 “negatives, then positives,” persons spend time in silent prayer, reflecting on the negative aspects

¹⁹ See task force resource of Bible study sessions by Frances Taylor Gench. The Session of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Arvada, CO, regularly uses biblical reflection. See Appendix C and a description of Biblical and Theological Reflection in “Resources for Fostering Community and Dialogue” (www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity).

²⁰ See “Principles of Polity” paper (www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity).

²¹ See “Resources for Fostering Community & Dialogue” and Appendix C on the First Presbyterian Church in Bend, Oregon.

178 of each option, after which they share their thoughts as a total group. They next spend time in
179 silence reflecting on the positive aspects of each option, which are then shared as a whole group.
180 After another period of prayerful reflection, the group senses whether a common direction is
181 emerging. Stating the cons first does not put the pros into a privileged position, but simply makes
182 it possible to really hear them.

183
184 With “option by option,” one option is considered at a time: each person spends time in silent
185 reflection naming the negatives and positives about that particular option, after which the whole
186 group shares. Then time is spent in silence for individuals to prayerfully reflect on the next
187 option, followed by sharing in the whole group. When all options have been weighed, the group
188 senses what common direction is evolving.

189 190 **4. Choose Direction**

191 Exploration has ended. The facilitator may send up a “trial balloon” that articulates where the
192 Holy Spirit seems to be leading. Persons may be asked to indicate their level of acceptance of the
193 trial balloon through a straw poll. Five levels of support can be indicated, using the number of
194 fingers held up:

- 195
196 Five fingers = strongly support
197 Four fingers = agree with reservation
198 Three fingers = mixed support, e.g., has questions or reservations, but willing to stand aside
199 Two fingers = somewhat opposed and has concerns
200 One finger = strongly opposed

201
202 Usually, if all participants are supporting at levels 5 and 4, consensus can be declared. If some are
203 signifying levels 3, 2, or 1, more time is usually taken to respond to questions and concerns and
204 possibly modify the option, direction, or timetable. In larger assemblies, different colors of cards
205 may be used to indicate levels of support, either about a particular option and/or in relation to
206 comments shared in discussion.²²

207
208 A group may return to the use of parliamentary procedure to formalize the outcome through a
209 vote and record any dissent if requested, or do this after a period of resting.

210 211 **5. Rest with the Decision**

212 Resting allows time for the decision to lie near the heart in a spirit of prayer to determine whether
213 it brings primarily feelings of consolation (a sense of peace and movement toward God) or
214 desolation (distress and movement away from God). A group may decide to allow their decision
215 to stand for a period of time before formally voting on and implementing it.²³ The task force
216 decided to gather a month after bringing closure to the discernment process to vote formally on
217 our recommendations.

218 219 **If Consensus Is Not Reached**

220 Consensus, as used in this paper, does not mean that the outcome is a unanimous vote, that the
221 result is everyone’s first choice, or that everyone agrees one hundred percent.²⁴ It does mean that
222 the views of all participants are encouraged and heard, all participants share the final decision,

²² See later section on the General Assembly of the Uniting Church of Australia.

²³ See *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised*, Section 14: “Postpone to a Certain Time (or Definitely).”

²⁴ To a parliamentarian, “consensus” means “unanimous.” *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised*, Section 4.25 speaks of “general consent” and “unanimous consent.”

223 those who disagree are willing to support it, and all agree to be responsible for implementing the
224 decision.

225

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

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- 229 • identify issues about which agreement has been reached
- 230 • identify issues that remain to be resolved at a later time
- 231 • identify possible steps for further exploration, perhaps by repeating some of the
- 232 discernment process
- 233 • appoint a smaller group or person to make the decision
- 234 • vote by majority rule
- 235 • drop the matter.²⁵

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Communal Discernment and Assemblies

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Large Assemblies

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240 Communal discernment processes can be used in large assemblies, but they will take a different
241 form from that with smaller groups. Learning can be gleaned from a number of Christian bodies
242 that have been using structured processes of communal discernment.²⁶ Each faith community has
243 shaped its process for communal discernment in accordance with its own particular traditions.
244 Recently, the World Council of Churches approved the use of a consensus-seeking process to
245 make decisions, partly in response to the pressing call from Orthodox member churches for a
246 process that is less likely to violate their consciences as a numerical minority in the council.

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Possible Design for Assemblies

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249 Based on experiences from these faith communities, Danny Morris and Charles Olsen have

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designed the following model that could be used with larger assemblies.²⁷

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252 One or two significant issues before an assembly are engaged through prayerful discernment. The
253 process may range over several meetings. Commissioners are trained in the dynamics and
254 practices of discernment in small groups at the beginning of the meeting. Times for covenants of
255 silence in solitude are arranged within each group so that all are able to reflect, listen, and pray.
256 Opening worship highlights the themes of vision, waiting, openness, and calling.

257

258 **Framing and Grounding:** The agenda-planning team frames the issue to be discerned in plenary
259 and offers a concise statement of a preliminary guiding principle based on criteria to which the
260 group's considerations must be faithful. Then small groups meet to build community, secure
261 clarity on the issues, and possibly revise the guiding principle.

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²⁵ Morris & Olsen, p. 93.

²⁶ These include the West Michigan and the New England United Methodist Annual Conferences; the United Church of Christ Ohio Conference; the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ; the Church of the Brethren; the Reformed Church in America; the Religious Society of Friends; the Benedictine Order in the Roman Catholic Church; the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand; and the Methodist Church in New Zealand. Charles Olsen, "Meeting and Deciding: The Practice of Spiritual Discernment and Judicatory Life: A Report of Five Annual Worshipful-Work Collegiums," January 2002.

²⁷ Morris & Olsen, pp. 115-125.

263 **Shedding:** Members of the small groups spend time in silent reflection to name the investments,
264 preconceived notions, or passions each brings to the issue and to consider how to release them.
265 The small group concludes with prayer, and next offers a prayer during the assembly’s worship as
266 part of confession and repentance.

267
268 **Rooting:** When the assembly reconvenes in plenary, the revised guiding principle is offered for
269 endorsement (or reworking). A few respected biblical scholars, theologians, and historians root
270 those assembled in their faith tradition by offering biblical, theological, and historical connections
271 with the issue.

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273 **Listening:** The assembly then hears accounts from individuals, congregations, or traditions.
274 Small groups meet to discuss the input and continue the exploration. A time of silence is
275 incorporated for listening to the Spirit.

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277 **Exploring:** After a break, the small groups explore various paths or options, first with individual
278 reflection and then as a group. The group leaders draw together a cluster of two to five potential
279 paths, name them, and give them to the agenda team. The agenda team consolidates them into
280 two to five options for consideration. This time concludes with extended prayer.

281
282 **Improving:** The agenda team identifies a cluster of possible paths and offers them to the small
283 groups for improvement. After a brief review of the agenda team’s offering, the group members
284 are called individually to improve each possible path. Then the group reconvenes and each shares
285 how the path could be improved.

286
287 **Weighing:** Remaining in small groups, the participants then spend time in silence to pray about
288 each path. After the silence, group members report on where they sense God’s Spirit may be
289 leading.

290
291 **Closing:** A closing time is scheduled. Small group leaders test for consensus to conclude the
292 discernment. Each group selects one person to report the wisdom of the group to the assembly.
293 When the assembly reconvenes, the agenda team brings a statistical report of the groups’
294 conclusions and the level of response. This serves as a kind of straw poll. From this the entire
295 assembly can picture a “sense of the meeting.” After another extended time of prayer, a
296 representative from any group may articulate to the assembly the wisdom of that one’s small
297 group as it discerned the leading of the Spirit. The facilitator may test for consensus, ask for more
298 time, or ask for a vote.

299
300 **Resting:** Commissioners may take time to sense whether the decision continues to seem right
301 before a formal vote is taken within parliamentary procedure.

302
303 **General Assembly of the Uniting Church of Australia**²⁸
304 The Uniting Church of Australia has been using a process of communal discernment for a number
305 of years. Their General Assembly meets for seven days every three years, with two hundred
306 seventy delegates. They are very intentional that their discernment of the Spirit is based in the
307 context of Christian community. Their “Manual for Meetings” begins with a section on the
308 formation of community. It is expected that twenty percent of their meeting time will be spent in
309 worship and community building. At its meeting in August 2003, each plenary began with
310 worship and Bible study. In the afternoons, delegates met in assigned discussion groups to talk

²⁸ Based on an article by Gradye Parsons, “A Consensus Observed,” *Presbyterian Outlook*, Vol. 185, No. 33, Oct.13, 2003, pp. 9-10.

311 about issues that were before the assembly. Morning and afternoon teas were also important times
312 for community building.

313
314 The presentation of business followed a threefold pattern with an information session, a
315 deliberative session, and a decision session.

316 317 **1. Information Session**

318 A proposal was presented, followed by questions for clarification or for further information. This
319 session lasted until the presiding officer, the president, was satisfied that the group had asked all
320 the questions it needed to ask.

321 322 **2. Deliberative Session**

323 Discussion on various viewpoints was encouraged. Each delegate was given an orange card to
324 signify support and a blue card to signify opposition. Delegates showed these cards after each
325 speech, which helped give those assembled and the president a sense of the mind of the assembly.
326 This helped avoid repetitious speeches and assisted the movement toward consensus, as the group
327 gauged levels of support for various ideas.

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329 Sometimes, several amendments were proposed during the deliberation stage. If consensus on the
330 amendments was apparent, they were incorporated into the original proposal. If larger or more
331 complicated amendments were proposed, discussion on the issue stopped and the original
332 presenters and the amendment presenters developed a common proposal to bring back to plenary.

333 334 **3. Decision Session**

335 Only minor changes to the proposal were allowed at this point. The benefits and limitations were
336 discussed. The blue and orange cards were again used to indicate agreement or disagreement with
337 the points made in the discussion. The president focused on both the process and the content.
338 When the discussion seemed to have reached its conclusion, the president asked, “Do you believe
339 we have reached consensus on this proposal?” If delegates raised a significant number of blue
340 cards, discussion continued. If only orange cards were raised, consensus had been reached. If a
341 few blue cards were displayed, the delegates who raised them were encouraged to share their
342 misgivings with the assembly. If they could be handled with a few word changes, consensus was
343 still able to be reached.

344
345 If the objections continued, the president sought to bring the assembly to agreement. The
346 president asked a series of questions of the assembly to ascertain whether those unable to support
347 the proposal felt as if the majority had heard their views. They were also asked if they could live
348 with the majority view and allow the assembly to record an agreement.

349
350 If opposition continued, the assembly had two choices. The first was to determine if the issue had
351 to be decided at that point, which allowed the assembly the opportunity to revisit the issue at a
352 later time. The second was to take a majority vote.

353 354 **Concerns**

355 With communal discernment, fewer decisions may flow from a particular meeting. Communal
356 discernment processes can take longer than other modes of decision making, especially if they are
357 new to participants. However, though the time of deliberation may take longer, the time for
358 implementation will likely be shorter because of the collaboration and ownership gained while
359 reaching consensus. Moreover, when a body uses only parliamentary procedure, it could spend
360 more time arguing over an issue than in collaboratively finding common ground.

361

362 A concern is sometimes expressed that persons in the minority can either attempt to exercise veto
363 power or be pressured to adopt the majority view. However, consensus is not the same as
364 unanimity. Those with minority viewpoints can choose to:

- 365 • withdraw their concerns
- 366 • permit the decision to be made, with the intent to abide by the decision, and request that
- 367 their concerns be recorded in the minutes
- 368 • state why they cannot support the decision at that time

369
370 The facilitator or group can determine whether it is best to resolve their concerns before
371 proceeding, go ahead and proceed with the decision, or lay down the matter. When minorities feel
372 their concerns have been heard, understood, and respected, their response is normally to allow the
373 body to move ahead.²⁹

374
375 Some wonder if the prophetic voice of the church is likely to be muted by this approach.
376 However, in an era of much violence in the world and political polarity in the United States,
377 efforts toward collaborative decision-making are themselves prophetic. The encouragement of
378 open discussion allows a greater diversity of views to be expressed, which can be a profound,
379 prophetic expression. Also, the care taken to reach decisions promotes ownership and, thus,
380 solidarity of the fellowship. Even if consensus is not reached, the reflection and enrichment can
381 strengthen the voice and health of the body.

382

383 **Conclusion**

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385 The church is called to proclaim and honor the power of the risen Christ, who guides us in our
386 deliberations, moves us toward reconciliation, and sends us forth as loving servants. Those who
387 follow the way of the cross are called to resist using the power of domination, because “it belongs
388 to Christ alone to rule, to teach, to call, and to use the Church as he wills” (G-1.0100b). The more
389 we surrender ourselves to Christ, the more we open ourselves to the unexpected, transforming
390 grace of God.

391 Come, Holy Spirit, come.

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²⁹ Rev. Dr. D’Arcy Wood, from the Uniting Church of Australia, in comments for the World Council of Churches, reflecting on the experience of other bodies that have used consensus-seeking processes.

394 **Appendix A - Congregational Case Studies**

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396 **The Session**

397 Trinity Presbyterian Church, Arvada, Colorado, 2004

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399 Trinity Presbyterian Church has 400 members, with a session of sixteen. The session uses a
400 discernment process with issues that have a large impact on the life of the church, and/or when
401 direction is less apparent. Even when the full discernment process is not used, its principles are
402 still practiced. When session members share their perceptions, rather than debating or diminishing
403 one another's ideas, they engage in collective listening for the good in what each person offers,
404 trusting that the highest good will rise to the top. Often, the affect of the group reveals that a
405 shared understanding of the Spirit's leading is building. Persons offer similar contributions that
406 build on one another.. Sometimes, the moderator of session will send up a "trial balloon" and take
407 a straw poll to test for levels of consensus on an idea. Often, other members of session will
408 respond to the question, "What does God seem to be saying?" with a synthesis of their own.
409 "Every experience has always led us to a conclusion that none of us had anticipated," said their
410 pastor, the Reverend John E. Anderson.

411
412 The discernment process takes place within the context of regular monthly session meetings, at
413 times over the course of several meetings. Sometimes it is known in advance that a discernment
414 process will be used; other times, the need for it becomes apparent in the midst of a discussion
415 when there is either confusion or a wide range of viewpoints. Then the session slows down in its
416 deliberation. Reflection on Scripture is incorporated.³⁰ Elders are invited to share what they hear
417 as a word of hope, challenge, or application to the situation.

418
419 In 2004, the church faced a budget gap of \$50,000, even though they had previously had a
420 balanced budget. The session spent three meetings discerning what they should do. Such a large
421 gap could mean a cut in staff or ministries. They were led to practice the Lord's Prayer—trusting
422 God for daily bread. They decided to work with a core, lean budget, not cut staff, and not spend
423 more than they received in any given month. If at the end of the month money was left, they
424 would allocate it for the coming month. The congregation was fully aware of the need and
425 approach, and was involved in extra commitment giving and fundraising. Some unexpected
426 expenses emerged, such as needing to replace the entire computer system after it shorted out. Yet,
427 the pastor said, "It was a delightful year. It was exciting to see at the end of each month whether
428 we had broken even or if we had more funds to allocate. It was a year in which we spent the least
429 amount of energy and worry about money." They ended the year \$33,000 ahead and with a new
430 discovery that God doesn't reveal how to use resources just once for a whole year, but month by
431 month.

432
433 **Pastor Nominating Committee**

434 St. Mark Presbyterian Church, Portland, Oregon
435 December, 2002 - September, 2003

436
437 St. Mark Presbyterian Church had become polarized due to an unsuccessful pastorate. Before a
438 new pastor nominating committee (PNC) was elected, a mission study was conducted. All
439 members of the church were encouraged to participate, and most did. Besides gathering input on
440 the history of the church and the current community context, the congregation completed written
441 surveys and participated in several series of small gatherings in members' homes that included

³⁰ See *Biblical and Theological Reflection* in "Resources for Fostering Community and Dialogue."

442 Bible study and prayer. The mission study results had high congregational ownership, and were
443 incorporated into the church information form (CIF).

444
445 Molly Keating, chair of the PNC, encouraged the committee to make decisions using a communal
446 spiritual discernment process, which they agreed to at their second meeting. Their process
447 included building consensus and times of silence for prayer and reflection, continuing the practice
448 that began with the mission study of listening carefully to the Holy Spirit and the voice of every
449 participant.

450
451 The group would often use the five-finger straw poll to check in and ascertain whether or not
452 everyone was in agreement and ready to move on.³¹ The group found this helpful to draw forth
453 additional input, which resulted in better decisions. It required more thought than simply a yes or
454 no, as well as gave persons more options through which they could respond. When three or fewer
455 fingers were shown by anyone on the PNC, they would stop and listen to the concerns,
456 incorporating different ideas before moving on.

457
458 The PNC spent three months writing the CIF, working until everyone felt they were fully
459 finished. They used consensus to decide questions for the interviews, characteristics they sought
460 in a pastor, which candidates to pursue, and, finally, who they would nominate for pastor. Ten
461 steps for communal spiritual discernment³² provided a helpful framework for their work. The
462 PNC fully supported their final nominee. Ms. Keating reported, “We developed a deep caring for
463 and commitment to the outcome, grew in appreciation for one another, and trusted God with what
464 was bigger than the five of us.”

465 **Finding Common Ground in Congregation and Community**

466 First Presbyterian Church, Bend, Oregon, 1998³³

467
468
469 The First Presbyterian Church is the only PC(USA) congregation in Bend, Oregon. Much
470 theological diversity exists among its 600 members. Advocacy against a measure before the state
471 legislature and a request for the use of the church building surfaced tension in the congregation on
472 same-gender relationships and issues. In January, 1998, the session commissioned a task force,
473 *Toward Reconciliation: Continuing the Homosexual Dialogue*, to “develop study opportunities
474 that represent the range of views found within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), to discern
475 Christ’s direction for each of us, to recommend strategies to help our congregation learn to love
476 across our differences, and to explore ministries with gay and lesbian people and their families.”

477
478 The task force was made up of ten members of the congregation representing differing
479 viewpoints. They met every other week for one and a half years. During that time they offered the
480 congregation a six-week study, “*Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate*
481 *Homosexuality*.”³⁴ Additionally, the task force members read many resources.

482

³¹ See description of five-finger method earlier on p. 6.

³² Danny E Morris. & Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together*, Upper Room Books, 1997.

³³ Revs. Patty and Tom Campbell-Schmitt were co-pastors. For more information, please contact elder Gretchen Williver, 21085 Don Street, Bend, OR, 97701; n7zth@empnet.com or Common Ground Network for Life and Choice, www.searchforcommonground.org. See also “Common Ground Dialogue Process” in “Resources for Fostering Community & Dialogue” (www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity).

³⁴ Sally B. Geis, & Donald E. Messer, Eds., *Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate Homosexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon), 1994.

483 During the task force’s life together, some citizens of Bend and several of its faith communities
484 were in tension around the issue of abortion. Planned Parenthood had established an office in the
485 city the year before, with the promise they would not conduct abortions there. But a year later,
486 Planned Parenthood started to do abortions. In light of the ensuing tension around this action, a
487 trainer was brought in from Spokane, Washington, who worked for Common Ground. He trained
488 people, including a few members of the task force of First Church, in how to be in dialogue with
489 one another. The task force learned about and attempted to conform to principles about dialogue
490 developed by Common Ground.

491
492 Task force members responded to the question, “Upon what would you most want your Christian
493 community to agree?” Each member responded. They began with forty-one statements. If any
494 part of a statement could not be agreed upon by the others, it went into the “disagree pile.” At the
495 beginning, the group had six statements upon which they agreed, and thirty-five about which they
496 disagreed. At any given meeting, a person could bring a statement out of the “disagree pile” for a
497 dialogue - not to change others’ minds, but to deepen understanding. Sometimes after such
498 dialogues, the group discovered that a slight change of language would allow the statement to go
499 into the “agree pile.” They ended up with twenty-seven statements of agreement and four
500 statements of disagreement. Out of the agree statements, the task force chose previous session and
501 General Assembly actions and policies they could affirm. They also recommended to the session
502 eight specific actions for ministry with gay and lesbian persons and their families.

503
504 Pastor Patty Campbell-Schmidt said, “Loving across our differences and dealing with tough
505 issues became a defining mark of the church. It became an evangelistic instrument. The church
506 became very healthy as it productively worked through conflict.” So, too, in the community after
507 dialogues on abortion, Interfaith Ministries was formed, which included a wide diversity of faith
508 communities. Its meetings highlight a particular theme that is explored from various religious
509 traditions.
510

510 **Appendix B - Presbytery Case Studies**

511 **Presbytery Clusters**

512 Lake Michigan Presbytery, 1999-2000

513 during the tenure of the Reverend Stephen Doughty as presbytery executive

514
515
516 In the fall, eight cluster meetings in the presbytery used a process for prayerful discernment to
517 explore three questions:

- 518 1) What hurt or concern do you live with in this presbytery right now?
519 2) What do you sense the living God calls us to cherish from our history or from our current
520 life as a community of faith?
521 3) Where do you sense God might be calling us as a community of faith, both in our action
522 and in our way of being?
523

524 Prior to eight more cluster meetings the following spring, all participants received summaries of
525 themes that had emerged in the previous series of meetings. They also received two questions that
526 became the focus of prayerful discernment at the spring meetings:

- 527 • As you consider what arose across the community in the first meetings, what
528 would you like to underline, expand on, or add to the list?
529 • On the deepest level, what do you sense this presbytery is to be about?
530

531 The impact of the discernment process was twofold. First, it laid the groundwork for the
532 presbytery to articulate, with real unanimity, its core values. This came in another year and a half,
533 but the discernment process opened persons across the presbytery to a shared consideration of
534 what they held most deeply as values, hopes, and aims for the body of which they were all a part.
535

536 Second, and at least as important, the discernment process strengthened relational bonds across
537 the presbytery. In 2001, an experienced outside consultant commented on the unusual strength of
538 the presbytery's interior relationships. Lake Michigan Presbytery had (and has) the same
539 theological and missional differences as most bodies in the denomination. The discernment
540 process, however, with its emphasis on truly prayerful listening, opened persons to one another,
541 deepened existing bonds, and put persons in touch with the greater depths where they were being
542 held together by the Loving One.
543

544 **Congregational Mission Studies**

545 Missouri River Valley, the Reverend Bart Brenner, presbytery executive

546
547 In 1993, the committee on ministry stopped requiring mission studies of congregations in
548 transition before they could elect a pastor nominating committee. Instead, they guide
549 congregations through a two-week discernment process. All members of the church are invited to
550 participate in a period of prayer and biblical reflection. They are commissioned on the first
551 Sunday of the two-week period for this season of discernment. Ten Scripture texts are suggested,
552 to which more can be added, for members to read during the two weeks. The texts are illustrative
553 of the call of the church, about such themes as the kingdom of God, the body of Christ, the salt of
554 the earth. Each participant is asked to reflect and write about the same text for a given day, asking
555 God to open his or her heart and mind. Reflection revolves around three questions:

- 556 1) What does the text tell me about God?
557 2) What does the text suggest God is calling our church to be and do?
558 3) What might be some of the things we need from a pastor to be and do that?

559 On the last Saturday of the two weeks, all read what they have written and note the two or three
560 things they answered for the last two questions that engage them the most (what they are most
561 drawn to, what has the most energy for them, or what seems the most important).
562 All who participate (even if they miss a few days of prayer and reflection) are invited to a
563 “gleaning session” after the two weeks. Persons who can’t come are encouraged to send their
564 notes with someone else. Those gathered divide into subgroups that listen to what each person
565 lifts up and condense that input into three or four dimensions for what the church is called to be
566 and do and what they would be seeking in a pastor. The input is then written up by an editing
567 team that shares a report with the session, congregation, and, later, with the pastor nominating
568 committee. The committee on ministry also uses the summation when it reviews the church
569 information form. The process generates energy and ownership within the congregation.

570 **Presbytery Meetings**

571 The Presbytery of Western Reserve, 1993-99
572 during the tenure of the Reverend Victoria Curtiss as general presbyter
573

574
575 The Presbytery of Western Reserve incorporated elements of communal discernment in several
576 ways. Overtures to presbytery initiated by a congregation or presbytery committee were reviewed
577 and possibly revised by a small group that represented a cross section of theological perspectives
578 before coming to the floor of presbytery. Many presbytery meetings included an hour for
579 dialogue in small groups in which there would be either the sharing of faith stories or discussion
580 about an issue on which they would later vote. For meetings in which controversy was anticipated
581 over an issue, the docket included a time for discussion as a “committee of the whole.” During
582 that period, commissioners did not make or debate motions but prayed in silence, asked
583 questions, stated concerns, offered possible options, and called for sensitivity and respect toward
584 one another.

585 **Presbytery Discernment Team**

586 designed by the Reverend Tim Jones
587
588 booklet available from the General Assembly Office of Committees on Preparation for Ministry
589

590 This model has been used with inquirers, candidates, pastors, sessions, and presbytery task forces
591 as they seek to discern how God is calling them to move into the future. A clearly stated purpose,
592 issue, or concern moves the discernment forward. If the discernment is for an individual, the
593 person invites six to eight people who know him or her in a variety of ways to serve as the
594 discernment team. Sessions and task forces may either serve as the team or appoint others. A
595 person who is flexible and open to the flow of groups serves as the leader. The team practices the
596 disciplines of prayer, Scripture reading, meditation, and silence. They need to be open to the
597 movement of the Holy Spirit and believe that the Spirit can and will lead the group.

598
599 The process:

- 600 1) Gather and get acquainted (15-20 minutes)
- 601 2) Worship and silence, built around a Scripture passage that speaks to the issue (30 minutes)
- 602 3) Prayer using *lectio divina* or another form of listening prayer
- 603 4) For a person: list spiritual gifts
- 604 For an organization: name possibilities and opportunities (45 minutes)
- 605 5) Individual sharing of reflections by each person, without discussion (30-45 minutes)
- 606 6) Break for meal, observing silence
- 607 7) Individual silent prayer to discern what are the three or four most appropriate options (45
- 608 minutes)
- 609 8) Individual sharing, this time noting any clarity of discernment that emerges

610 9) Closure – (when discernment has occurred) through a time of worship celebration and
611 thanksgiving. When discernment does not occur, the group decides whether to continue the
612 process or to return to it at a later time.

613 **Sabbatical Period of Discernment**

614 Giddings-Lovejoy Presbytery
615 the Reverend Paul T. Reiter, presbytery executive
616

617
618 In the fall of 2001, Giddings-Lovejoy Presbytery had a personnel budget deficit of \$170,000,
619 involved 177 persons in over thirty committees—many without a clear purpose for their work—
620 and had standing rules that did not allow space to discern the work of the Spirit in their midst.
621 Relationships within the presbytery exhibited separateness among the five disparate groups that
622 had been combined from different presbyteries to be one presbytery with reunion in 1983.

623
624 The new presbytery executive, Paul Reiter, building on his previous twelve years of experience
625 integrating spirituality with administration, encouraged the presbytery to enter a yearlong
626 sabbatical period. During that time they would discern where God was at work in their midst,
627 review the role of the presbytery, and explore what God was calling them to be and do.
628 “Everyday Creativity,” a resource by DeWitt Jones, helped set the stage for the sabbatical by
629 encouraging a reframing of the work of the presbytery. The sabbatical began in the fall of 2002,
630 allowing the constitutional committees and several ministry teams to continue while passion
631 emerged. At the end of that year, the presbytery voted to extend the sabbatical one more year to
632 allow the relationships to build in the presbytery and clarity of purpose to emerge.

633
634 During that time, the mission council met monthly and engaged in a discernment process that
635 included using resources from *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for*
636 *Congregations* by Gil Rendle and Alice Mann. In other areas of the presbytery, several groups
637 used resources developed by the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the
638 Church. Twelve geographical groups, called ministry areas, were formed to build relationships,
639 worship, study, and do mission together, and to be a catalyst for bringing concerns or new ideas
640 to the whole presbytery. The ministry areas were also guided in discernment, receiving
641 recommendations from the mission council for that exploration.

642
643 The listening and feedback moved from small group to large group feedback, and then to mission
644 council reflection. Pockets for conversation for clergy and laity were created in which strengths
645 and weaknesses of the presbytery were assessed, positive dimensions were affirmed, and needed
646 changes were identified. Ministry areas were reshaped to create centers for dialogue and address
647 emerging concerns. A new strategic plan for 2005 and beyond—including a new mission
648 statement,³⁵ standing rules and by-laws—was adopted. The staffing rationale is now being
649 revisited. All of this took place while the presbytery wrestled with the tension between
650 evangelism and mission that was part of its history and name,³⁶ and decided both were needed.

651
652 The sabbatical raised anxiety among those who prefer to nail down concrete plans in a short
653 period of time; however taking such time and space allowed creativity to blossom. The presbytery
654 office has been renovated to create space for the city neighborhood association’s use, as well as

³⁵ The mission statement is “To build relationships that lead congregations in transforming ministries so that together we embrace the fullness of the Kingdom of God.”

³⁶ Salmon Giddings was the first evangelist to plant a Reformed witness west of the Mississippi River, starting twelve churches. Elijah Parish Lovejoy was a lawyer and pastor who published writings on the ills of slavery. He was eventually murdered for his justice witness.

655 for presbytery training events. Mission projects are funded based on input and relationships with
656 churches geographically close to them. Current dialogues with representatives of the Jewish
657 community could only happen because of the presbytery's previous experience with dialogue.
658 The presbytery is prepared for conversations, rather than debate, as they await the final report of
659 the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church.

661 **Appendix C – Synod Case Studies**

662 **Fresh Directions**

663 Synod of the Covenant, October 1999

664 facilitated by presbytery executives the Reverends Stephen Doughty and John Sharick
665
666

667 Each presbytery sent three persons to a two-day meeting of the synod, held for the purpose of
668 discerning fresh directions for that body. The meeting began with a resource person introducing
669 the concept of discernment. Worship offered biblical themes on the tribe of Israel moving through
670 the wilderness. Trained leaders worked with three different groups on questions relating to the
671 needs and opportunities of the synod. The groups moved through a pattern of prayerfully sitting
672 with questions, sharing responses, and listening for themes. After three separate times of the
673 small group work, all joined together and, by consensus, developed reflections to share back with
674 the wider body of the synod.

675 **Annual Meeting Design**

676 The Synod of Toronto of the Presbyterian Church in Canada

677 facilitated by the Reverend Charles Olsen
678
679

680 The synod introduced and practiced the movements of spiritual discernment in its yearly meeting
681 in 1998, then evaluated and extended it in the 1999 synod meeting. In the first year, they built
682 into the meeting agenda a two-hour seminar presentation on discernment and invited Charles
683 Olsen to serve as facilitator for discernment on the floor. Eight issues had been selected from a
684 longer list of resolutions for consideration. This number proved to be too many—improving each
685 issue in plenary session was cumbersome. So, the second year they selected and trained twenty-
686 five discernment group table leaders. Then the synod gathered at twenty-five round tables,
687 confined the issues for consideration to two, and adjourned into a committee of the whole for two
688 days of discernment. During that time, Olsen and the trained discernment leaders helped facilitate
689 the process around tables. When they finished, they informed the stated clerk that they were ready
690 to report. They were called back into session by the moderator to receive and vote on the report as
691 the whole assembly. Finally, they commended the process of communal discernment to the
692 church at every level where decisions are made.
693

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