

Discernment and Decision-Making

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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.

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

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

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

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

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

1. Generate valid and useful information and share it with all the parties involved.
2. Allow free and informed choice—identify areas of agreement to enable parties to make decisions collaboratively; and identify areas where there is not agreement, so that each party may reach its own independent decisions, share those with the other party, and collaboratively decide how to live and work together in spite of differences.
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.

Structured Communal Discernment

Structured processes for communal discernment have been developed and used by several faith traditions.¹¹ 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. Such a process would be more beneficial than parliamentary procedure for a body to use when dealing with significant matters that affect the whole body, especially those around which there is current or potential conflict.

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

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

- transforming the deliberative body into a “committee of the whole”
- acting as a “quasi-committee of the whole”
- allowing “informal consideration” and “crystallization of opinion”¹²

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

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

The Process of Communal Discernment

Prerequisites

One of the foundational principles for the PC(USA) is “that all their decisions should be founded upon the revealed will of God.”¹³ John Calvin emphasized that piety, in which reverence and love of God are joined, is prerequisite to any true knowledge of God.¹⁴

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.¹⁵

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?”¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷

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.

¹³ *Book of Order*, G-1.0307.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), The Library of Christian Classics, Vol. XX, Book 1, Chapter 2, p. 39.

¹⁵ See “Covenant of the General Assembly Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church” (www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity).

¹⁶ Danny E Morris & Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together*, Upper Room Books, 1997, pp. 78-79.

¹⁷ From a presentation by Stephen Doughty.

1. Establish a Common Starting Point

Participants need to have a consciously shared experience of their common calling in Christ. The task force engaged in worship and Bible study daily,¹⁸ as well as celebrated the Lord's Supper at each meeting. We spent many hours reading about our common heritage and learning through presentations on the history, theology, polity, and ecclesiology of the PC(USA).¹⁹ We also hammered out theological perspectives we all could affirm.

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

2. Gather and Share Information

Participants draw on wisdom from biblical texts, their spiritual heritage, and their own experiences as people of faith that illumine the matters to be discerned. 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.

The task force read and analyzed numerous articles by a variety of theologians and biblical scholars. We listened to the wider church through focus groups and workshops at General Assemblies, conversations at synod consultations, presentations at presbytery and affinity group gatherings, phone interviews and surveys, correspondence, and encounters with observers at our meetings. We listened to one another and God's Spirit through a variety of tools, including mutual invitation, polarity management, graced communal history, prayerful listening, silence, and taking the pulse.²⁰ Once options were named, additional information was shared about possible ramifications of implementation for each option.

3. Explore Options

The group then 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 which three to five they want to explore further.

The group then weighs the options in response to the leading of God's Spirit. The uniqueness of the discernment model is that it allows for collaboratively and prayerfully evaluating options.

Discernment differs from debate in that:

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

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

¹⁸ See task force Bible study sessions by Frances Taylor Gench (www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity). 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).

¹⁹ See "Principles of Polity" paper (www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity).

²⁰ See page 12 on mutual invitation and Appendix C on the First Presbyterian Church in Bend, Oregon. Also see "Resources for Fostering Community and Dialogue" (www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity).

of each option, after which they share their thoughts as a total group. They next spend time in silence 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.

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

4. Choose Direction

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

Five fingers = strongly support

Four fingers = agree with reservation

Three fingers = mixed support, e.g., has questions or reservations, but willing to stand aside

Two fingers = somewhat opposed and has concerns

One finger = 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 is usually taken to respond to questions and concerns and possibly modify the option, direction, or timetable. In larger assemblies, different colors of cards may be used to indicate levels of support, either about a particular option and/or in relation to comments shared in discussion.²¹

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

5. 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 primarily 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.²² The task force decided to gather a month after bringing closure to the discernment process to vote formally on our recommendations.

If Consensus Is Not Reached

Consensus, as used in this paper, does not mean that the outcome is a unanimous vote, that the result is everyone’s first choice, or that everyone agrees one hundred percent.²³ It does mean that the views of all participants are encouraged and heard, all participants share the final decision,

²¹ See later section on the General Assembly of the Uniting Church of Australia.

²² See *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised*, Section 14: “Postpone to a Certain Time (or Definitely).”

²³ To a parliamentarian, “consensus” means “unanimous.” *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised*, Section 4.25 speaks of “general consent” and “unanimous consent.”

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

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.²⁴

Communal Discernment and Assemblies

Large Assemblies

Communal discernment processes can be used in large assemblies, but they will take a different form from that with smaller groups. Learning can be gleaned from a number of Christian bodies that have been using structured processes of communal discernment.²⁵ Each faith community has shaped its process for communal discernment in accordance with its own particular traditions. Recently, the World Council of Churches approved the use of a consensus-seeking process to make decisions, partly in response to the pressing call from Orthodox member churches for a process that is less likely to violate their consciences as a numerical minority in the council.

Possible Design for Assemblies

Based on experiences from these faith communities, Danny Morris and Charles Olsen have designed the following model that could be used with larger assemblies.²⁶

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

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

²⁴ Morris & Olsen, p. 93.

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ Morris & Olsen, pp. 115-125.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

General Assembly of the Uniting Church of Australia²⁷

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

²⁷ Based on an article by Gradye Parsons, "A Consensus Observed," *Presbyterian Outlook*, Vol. 185, No. 33, Oct. 13, 2003, pp. 9-10.

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

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

1. Information Session

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

2. Deliberative Session

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

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

3. Decision Session

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

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

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

Concerns

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

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

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

The facilitator or group can determine whether it is best to resolve their concerns before proceeding, go ahead and proceed with the decision, or lay down the matter. When minorities feel their concerns have been heard, understood, and respected, their response is normally to allow the body to move ahead.²⁸

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

Conclusion

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

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Victoria Grace Curtiss
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²⁸ 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.

Discussion Questions

1. Using mutual invitation (see next page), share thoughts on these questions, either in one or two rounds:

- What in our current practices helps us through conflict?
- What is conducive for discerning the mind of Christ in a group?

2. Distribute and review the handout “Forms of Deliberation” on page 13. Both dialogue and seeking consensus may be aspects of the larger process of spiritual communal discernment. What additional or different dimensions does a process of spiritual discernment include that dialogue and consensus-seeking alone do not? What stands out particularly as a contrast between communal discernment and current practices of our governing bodies?

3. Read the case studies for the church context in which you serve (see appendices A through C). What from others’ experience do you think would be helpful to incorporate in your own setting?

4. How can you imagine incorporating dimensions of communal discernment in the life of the church?

Mutual Invitation

- Objectives:** To facilitate sharing and discussion in a multicultural setting
- Group type:** Any
- Group size:** 4 to 15 participants
- Setting:** Participants should sit in a circle.
- Materials:** Newsprint and markers
- Time needed:** Depends on group size; to tell how much time will be required for each round of sharing, multiply the number of participants by five minutes.

How to proceed:

- A. *Let participants know how much time is set aside for this process.*
- B. *Introduce the topic to be discussed or information to be gathered or question(s) to be answered. Write this on newsprint and post it on a wall so everyone can see it.*
- C. *Introduce the process by reading the following:*
To ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak, we will proceed in the following way:

The leader or designated person will share first. After that person has spoken, he or she then invites another to share. Whom you invite does not need to be the person next to you. After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege to invite another to share. If you don't want to say anything, simply say, "Pass," and proceed to invite another to share. We will do this until everyone has been invited.

If this is the first time you use this with a group, it will be very awkward at first. The tendency is to give up on the process and go back to the whoever-wants-to-talk-can-talk way. If you are persistent in using this process every time you facilitate the gathering, the group will eventually get used to it and have great fun with it. A good way to ensure the process goes well the first time is to make sure there are a couple of people in the group who have done this before and, as you begin the process, invite them first.

Problems to anticipate

This process addresses differences in the perception of personal power among the participants. Some people will be eager for their turn, while others will be reluctant to speak when they are invited. If a person speaks very briefly and then does not remember to invite the next person, do not invite for him or her. Simply point out that this person has the privilege of inviting the next person to speak. This is especially important if a person "passes." By ensuring that this person still has the privilege to invite, you affirm and value that person independent of that person's verbal ability.

From *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community*, by Eric H. F. Law. Chalice Press, 1993. Appendix A.

Forms of Deliberation
Compiled by Victoria G. Curtiss

Debate	Dialogue	Discernment
One side knows “the truth” and seeks to persuade others to join its way of thinking	Understanding or direction emerges through listening to many or all the voices in the group	A community of believers seeks guidance of the Holy Spirit through prayer; reflection on Scripture, tradition, values, and current realities; dialogue; and finding places of agreement
Defends a viewpoint	Suspends judgment	Offers “holy indifference”
Uses advocacy, persuasion	Balances advocacy with inquiry; explores underlying assumptions, causes, rules	Takes a “long loving look at the real” – contemplation
Uses hard data to get to answers to problems; reasoning is made explicit	Seeks to get to deeper questions and possibly new framing of issues	Uses intellect/reason and affect/intuition: mind and spirit experience
Resolves by defeating or persuading opposing side; or may find synthesis of opposites	Invents unprecedented possibilities and new insights; produces a collective flow	Uncovers a decision rather than making it; discovers what is most life-giving and loving as listen to wisdom of the Spirit and all voices
Distinguishes and polarizes differences	Looks for what exists between extremes of differences	Seeks to hold polarities in balance
Sees parts, may seek connection among them	Looks for coherence first	Builds on belief that all are part of one body of Christ
Persons identify with positions or stay in fixed roles	Conversation uncovers concerns, needs, fears, hopes, interests	Options are weighed apart from being identified with particular persons
Each side names strengths of its own position and weaknesses of the other	Group members all work together to name strengths and weaknesses of options	Group members all name the negatives of an option, then the positives
Either/or choices: binary	Multiple options	May generate multiple options, discover a “third way,” or discern yes or no
Knower’s mind	Learner’s mind	Seeker’s mind

Appendix A - Congregational Case Studies

The Session

Trinity Presbyterian Church, Arvada, Colorado, 2004

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

The discernment process takes place within the context of regular monthly session meetings, at times over the course of several meetings. Sometimes it is known in advance that a discernment process will be used; other times, the need for it becomes apparent in the midst of a discussion when there is either confusion or a wide range of viewpoints. Then the session slows down in its deliberation. Reflection on Scripture is incorporated.²⁹ Elders are invited to share what they hear as a word of hope, challenge, or application to the situation.

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

Pastor Nominating Committee

St. Mark Presbyterian Church, Portland, Oregon
December, 2002 – September, 2003

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

²⁹ See *Biblical and Theological Reflection* in "Resources for Fostering Community and Dialogue."

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

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

The group would often use the five-finger straw poll to check in and ascertain whether or not everyone was in agreement and ready to move on.³⁰ The group found this helpful to draw forth additional input, which resulted in better decisions. It required more thought than simply a yes or no, as well as gave persons more options through which they could respond. When three or fewer fingers were shown by anyone on the PNC, they would stop and listen to the concerns, incorporating different ideas before moving on.

The PNC spent three months writing the CIF, working until everyone felt they were fully finished. They used consensus to decide questions for the interviews, characteristics they sought in a pastor, which candidates to pursue, and, finally, who they would nominate for pastor. Ten steps for communal spiritual discernment³¹ provided a helpful framework for their work. The PNC fully supported their final nominee. Ms. Keating reported, “We developed a deep caring for and commitment to the outcome, grew in appreciation for one another, and trusted God with what was bigger than the five of us.”

Finding Common Ground in Congregation and Community

First Presbyterian Church, Bend, Oregon, 1998³²

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

The task force was made up of ten members of the congregation representing differing viewpoints. They met every other week for one and a half years. During that time they offered the congregation a six-week study, “*Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate Homosexuality*.”³³ Additionally, the task force members read many resources.

³⁰ See description of five-finger method earlier on p. 6.

³¹ Danny E Morris & Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together*, Upper Room Books, 1997.

³² 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).

³³ Sally B. Geis, & Donald E. Messer, Eds., *Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate Homosexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon), 1994.

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

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

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

Appendix B - Presbytery Case Studies

Presbytery Clusters

Lake Michigan Presbytery, 1999-2000
during the tenure of The Reverend Stephen Doughty as presbytery executive

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

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

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

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

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

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

Congregational Mission Studies

Missouri River Valley, The Reverend Bart Brenner, presbytery executive

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

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

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

Presbytery Meetings

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

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

Presbytery Discernment Team

designed by The Reverend Tim Jones
booklet available from the General Assembly Office of Committees on Preparation for Ministry

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

The process:

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

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

Sabbatical Period of Discernment

Giddings-Lovejoy Presbytery
The Reverend Paul T. Reiter, presbytery executive

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

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

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

The listening and feedback moved from small group to large group feedback, and then to mission council reflection. Pockets for conversation for clergy and laity were created in which strengths and weaknesses of the presbytery were assessed, positive dimensions were affirmed, and needed changes were identified. Ministry areas were reshaped to create centers for dialogue and address emerging concerns. A new strategic plan for 2005 and beyond—including a new mission statement,³⁴ standing rules and by-laws—was adopted. The staffing rationale is now being revisited. All of this took place while the presbytery wrestled with the tension between evangelism and mission that was part of its history and name,³⁵ and decided both were needed.

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

³⁴ 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.”

³⁵ 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.

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

Appendix C – Synod Case Studies

Fresh Directions

Synod of the Covenant, October 1999

facilitated by presbytery executives The Reverends Stephen Doughty and John Sharick

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

Annual Meeting Design

The Synod of Toronto of the Presbyterian Church in Canada

facilitated by The Reverend Charles Olsen

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

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