

# CONGREGATIONAL DISCERNMENT: FINDING GOD'S WAY TOGETHER

BY TERESA BLYTHE

**M**oney and how to spend it can be an emotional, even explosive issue for churches. Congregational discernment – a spiritual practice that brings people together in prayer and deep reflection to listen to how God's Spirit is leading the church – can be especially helpful in matters involving stewardship of money.

Discernment is easy to recommend and difficult to do. Experience and understanding of God varies widely among individuals and congregations, making communal discernment a challenge, but one that is well worth the time, patience, and energy.

As a spiritual practice, discerning God's desire for us has clear biblical roots. We know from Deuteronomy 30:14 that God's word is "very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." And in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5–7) Jesus outlines some excellent benchmarks for making choices.

Much of the later writing about discernment comes from two distinct strains of Christianity – Quakers and Jesuits, traditions that place a heavy emphasis on discernment in community. If you are not a Quaker or a Jesuit, it is likely you need some practice in communal discernment or some reflection on how your community has listened to the leading of Christ in the past to better understand how God speaks to communities. Communal or congregational discernment takes dedication to prayer, a willingness to let go of personal agendas, and faith that God does speak to us and that we can develop "ears to hear" that voice.

## Prayer Is Essential

If you aren't praying, it isn't likely that your congregation will hear God's voice. Contemplative prayer – silence, deep reflection, waiting on God's response – has a way of opening people to divine possibilities. Two contemplative practices that are especially helpful



for congregational discernment are *Awareness Examen* and *Lectio Divina*.

Let's suppose a church's leadership team has noticed that it has not set aside a tithe for missions. This would be an excellent item for communal discernment. Since the place to start is prayer, the worship leader might make time one Sunday for a large group *Examen*, a traditional Jesuit practice of considering actions in light of faith. He or she could hand out a list of the major expenditures of the church and allow time for silent reflection and sharing on these two questions:

- As you consider these budget items in prayer, which ones fill you with the most gratitude and joy?
- As you consider these budget items in prayer, which ones leave you with the least gratitude and joy?

With a group *Examen* it is important to move beyond what each individual has to say on the issue and ask, "What is the Spirit saying to the church as we consider these responses?" Doing such an exercise in worship would not necessarily complete the discernment on that topic, but would be an excellent beginning.

Taking the same case – congregational giving to mission – the worship team could also lead a time of *Lectio Divina*, praying with scripture. Use a passage about giving, such as the story of the widow's last coins, Mark 12:41–44. Before reading it, ask the congregation to be in prayer, listening for a word, phrase, or image that feels significant to them. Read the passage aloud two or three times, with silence between the readings. Ask members

to share their chosen words aloud. To move this from individual reflection to communal reflection, ask how these words connect with the life of the congregation, especially around matters of giving. Plan time for further discussion after worship.

## Typical Block to Discernment

We discover a lot about ourselves and our congregations in discernment. One typical block that arises in discernment is stubbornness – wanting our own way. Jesuit founder Ignatius of Loyola taught that we need to keep the outcome of any discernment in God's hands, not our own. We must be willing to have our minds and hearts changed by the information, compassion, and wisdom shared by others. If we do not feel this openness or "holy indifference" that Ignatius taught, we need to ask for it in prayer.

## Gathering Information is Important

Returning to our case study, we find the leadership team has decided that yes, the congregation does intend to tithe. It would then need to gather information about how the budget might be restructured so that 10 percent of the church income is earmarked for mission giving. This brings up a new question, "What might we cut back on in order to set aside 10 percent?" Gathering information on this question could include a brainstorming session in which people merely offer ideas without initially evaluating any of them. Quakers sometimes hold what they call "threshing" meetings to get a myriad of ideas and differences of opinions on the table before narrowing the focus on what is essential. You might use focus groups or small groups that report back to a larger group.

## Considering Options

Let's say the congregation held a threshing meeting where lots of viewpoints

and ideas about budget cuts were offered. The leadership team eventually found its way to a tithe. Now the question for discernment becomes, "To what effort do we give this tithe?" Another brainstorming session could be held to gather ideas. Once those ideas are narrowed down to a few, the leadership team can weigh the options and make a decision. This is where a spiritual practice from the Quaker tradition called "clearness committee" is useful.

### Clearness Committee

At its inception in Quaker history, clearness committee was a way for young couples to gauge whether or not they were suited for one another in marriage. They would gather selected members of the community into a circle for discernment. The circle would spend significant time in silence, the Friends' form of worship. Out of the silence members would explore possible impediments or ask important questions to help the couple decide if their relationship should proceed to marriage.

The process of asking questions or speaking one's truth from the midst of deep silence – and only when moved by the Holy Spirit – is the heart of clearness committee.

Let's suppose the leadership team had narrowed its tithing options down to three: supporting a homeless shelter;

giving to the denomination's mission agency; or creating a food pantry at the church. They meet on an evening when everyone can devote two to three hours to the discernment process. They select a clerk, who facilitates, keeps time, and reminds members of the guidelines. They set a goal for either coming to a "sense of unity" around a choice or scheduling another session by the two-and-a-half-hour mark.

The guidelines for an effective clearness committee are important. Silence is given a high priority, so the clerk begins a session with a brief introduction to both the guidelines and the discernment question, and then proceeds to a time of silent prayer for at least ten minutes. When that is done, the clerk asks participants to share what they feel the Spirit is saying to the leadership team regarding the options. Committee members are instructed to share only what they feel is inspired by God. Silent prayer fills the space between sharing. Everyone shares once before anyone shares a second time. Persons need not share their inspiration if it has already been shared by another; and no one is to criticize, judge, or advise the group about another person's sharing.

About 30 minutes before the end of the meeting, the clerk asks if there is a "sense of unity" about the discernment question. If several people spoke

about feeling a pull toward one of the options, the clerk may ask if there is unity around that one option. Or if the group felt that two options were equally important and manageable, there could be a sense of unity around splitting the tithe. The point is the unity, which means everyone in the group can admit that the Spirit seems to be moving in that direction. With unity, you do not need everyone wholeheartedly in favor of an option, but you need everyone to agree to support the group's sense of clarity about how God is leading or, at the very least, not stand in the way.

One of the beautiful by-products of congregational discernment is the community it builds. Praying together, learning to listen to how the Spirit is speaking to the church, and listening to one another is an adventure full of learning, wisdom sharing, and insight. As a congregation does this important work, it invariably gets to know God and one another better.

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### Resources for Congregational Discernment

- For an extensive bibliography on discernment-oriented leadership, go to George Fox University's website: <http://www.georgefox.edu>.
- For more information about using the *Awareness Examen* and *Lectio Divina* in group settings, see *50 Ways to Pray* (Abingdon Press, 2006) by Teresa Blythe.
- For more specific information about congregational discernment, see *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations* (Morehouse Publishing, 1999) by Suzanne Farnham and others; *Practicing Discernment Together – Finding God's Way Forward in Decision Making* (Barclay Press, 2007) by Lon Fendall and others.
- For more on the practice of clearness committee, visit the Center for Courage and Renewal at <http://www.couragerenewal.org>. You might also locate the out-of-print resource, *Spiritual Discernment: The Context and Goal of Clearness Committees* by Patricia Loring.

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