

A Discerning Church: Leadership Matrix Seminar
Rev. Merrie S. Carson, March 1, 2014

My Story

The Problem

Introduction and Three Key Questions
How 7 Cultural Influences Affect Congregational Discernment/Decision Making
Lakeside Church

Isn't There a Better Way? Yes!

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John 10: 2-5, 14-16, 25-27: The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." ... ¹⁴"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ... The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, ²⁶but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. ²⁷My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸

Jesus

John 15:12-14, 16-17: My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command... You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.

Jesus

John 17: 20b-23: I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Jesus

I think there ought to be some connection between what a group claims to be, and the way it does things. The church claims to be a community of faith; is there any connection between this claim and its actual communal life? This could be tested by looking at several places where churches express their life, but a particularly important and revealing place is the process of reaching decision.¹

Luke Timothy Johnson

No longer can the church be run like a business or managed like a branch of government. Rather, it must begin to function like the Body God intended it to be where every member is in subjection to Christ and in submission to one another.²

Norman Nideng

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1893, 1996), 10.

² Norman Nideng, "There's a Better Way than Voting!!" *Searching Together* 13, no. 3 (Autumn 1984):17. See also Janice Love, "Can We All Agree? Governing the WCC by Consensus," *The Christian Century*, 119, no 23 (November 6-19, 2002): 8-10.

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My Story: Four and a half years ago I began a DMin program in Leadership and Spiritual Formation from George Fox Seminary. As I prayed and thought about the topic that I would write my dissertation on, my many experiences of less than stellar, if not downright awful and painful, experiences of group and congregational decision making (which I won't go into now!) came to mind. I thought there must be a better way than what I was used to, with all of the lobbying, power plays, emotional manipulation, pressure tactics, and divisiveness. I knew that unfortunately this was not a new issue, but one that has plagued the church since it was born:

Old Issue: James--destructive arguments (Jas 2: 5-7; 4:1-12).

The Apostle Paul --two letters to the Corinthians to help them deal with divisiveness, chastised them for their secular legal disputes

Urged Ephesians to "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph 5:21)

Asked the Philippians to "make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others" (Phil 2:2-4).

Historically congregations and denominations have bitterly argued and split, sometimes over important issues, but many times over insignificant ones such as the proverbial "color of the carpet." Unfortunately, "horror stories" of church decision making "gone bad" are common, as I found out from talking with my cohort, friends, and family about my proposed topic--I'm sure you have your own sad stories. Congregations often end making decisions based on the sum of individual member preferences, limited information, and a naturalistic pragmatic world-view. God is dishonored by His people's contentious decision making, the Church is shamed, and its witness is compromised (Jn 17:20-23). So the question is, why do we keep using destructive

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congregational decision-making practices? Tradition? Inertia? Cultural barriers, Power and control issues? Ignorance that there are better ways? Probably all of these and more. Looking for answers I found that I was not alone in this search. Thirty years ago Pastor Norman Nideng wondered in a magazine article: “Seeing that our methods divide congregations, splinter fellowships, and alienate Christians, can we still defend them as being anointed by God? Isn’t there at least a suspicion that somewhere there must be a better way? Can such a way be found in Scripture?”³ Eden Grace, a member of the Religious Society of Friends USA (Quaker) observed in 2003:

Many churches yearn for a governance structure which is less politicized, and more closely interlaced with the spiritual life of the church—which is not “business” so much as it is community-building and spiritual discernment. We have a great desire to know each other more deeply through our shared commitment to the work of the church. Does our business facilitate a deepening of community? Bodies which use parliamentary procedure frequently begin and end their meetings with prayer, but these too easily become bookends, perfunctory prayers which have little relationship to the decisions being debated. There is no mechanism during the debate for offering prayer, pausing for silent reflection, recalling a Bible story, or inviting a hymn. Worship and business are separate realms, each with its own order.⁴

So, why is this the case? And what does this say about who a congregation is and what they really believe—not just what they claim to believe? As I researched different models of church decision making I came across this quote by Luke Timothy Johnson which really challenged me:

I think there ought to be some connection between what a group claims to be, and the way it does things. The church claims to be a community of faith; is there any connection between this claim and its actual communal life? This could be tested by looking at

³ Norman Nideng, “There’s a Better Way than Voting!!” *Searching Together* 13, no. 3 (Autumn 1984):17. See also Janice Love, “Can We All Agree? Governing the WCC by Consensus,” *The Christian Century*, 119, no 23 (November 6-19, 2002): 8-10.

⁴ Eden Grace, “Guided by the Mind of Christ: Yearning for a New Spirituality of Church Governance.” Edengrace.org. www.edengrace.org/guided.html (accessed May 30, 2011). Also published in *Ecumenical Trends* 32, no. 4 (April 2003): 1-7. See also Marlene Kropf, “Discernment: A River Runs through It: Flowing with the Current of the Spirit in Church Meetings”, Mennonite Church USA. www.mennonitechurch.ca/resourcecentre/ResourceDownload/7081 (accessed May 30, 2011).

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several places where churches express their life, but a particularly important and revealing place is the process of reaching decision.⁵

Carl Dudley says much the same thing:

How a congregation makes decisions about spending its time and energy is an important window on the inner dynamics of its life together. ... The way these priorities are established strongly affects the congregational climate—its general feeling of warmth and support, its overall morale, its general openness to change, its usual levels of conflict, and its habits for including people in decisions.⁶

Today I want to share with you a taste of what I found out as I explored congregational discernment and decision making and I want to focus on Three Key questions:

1. *What cultural factors influence (for good and for bad) how we make decisions as a congregation?* Often we are blind to our culture, assuming that the way we do things is the way they should be done. Sometimes cultural influences lead us astray and prevent us from making good God-honoring decisions in godly loving ways, and we don't even realize it. So we will look at 7 cultural influences that seriously affect our congregational decision making.
2. *What does our congregation's way of making congregational decisions tell us about what we really believe about God's guidance and the operation of the "body of Christ"?* If Luke Timothy Johnson and Carl Dudley are right—and I think they are—examining how we normally make congregational decisions will tell us a lot about who we really are and what we really believe as a congregation.
3. What would be a "better way," one that is more faithful to the Church's identity as the "body of Christ," for congregational discernment and decision making? This would include examining what elements are necessary for good healthy congregational decision making, as well as looking at helpful biblical and historical models.

It is my hope that by the time we are done, you'll have some answers to all three of those question and a few practical ideas about how you might begin to change any unhealthy decision making patterns in your own congregation. So let's start by looking at cultural influences.

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1893, 1996), 10.

⁶ Carl S. Dudley, "Process: Dynamics of Congregational Life," in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, eds. Nancy Ammerman, Jackson Carroll, Carl Dudley and William McKinney (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 111.

Seven Cultural Influences and

How They Affect Congregational Discernment and Decision Making

Rationalism—*Problems*: not bringing all parts of self to the decision/discernment process, ignoring of emotions, devaluing of experiences. *Solutions*: *emotional/experiential validation and awareness*. Love the Lord Your God with all ... (Mk 12:30).

Naturalism—*Problems*: Limited humanity is in charge of everything, and we are fallen and delusional that we can bring about utopia by our own efforts. Control, anxiety, dictatorship cause no one greater is in charge—we're on our own to figure out life. Prayerlessness, lack of belief in divine speech, functional atheism, rationalized belief, lack of understanding, trust in the guidance of the HS. Lack of discernment leading to heresy and problems—no assurance that God's will is discerned and done. *Solutions*: *spiritual guidance component, increased desire for deeper spirituality, training in discernment, accountability to the community*. The Lord Created the Heavens and the Earth ... (Gn 1, 2, Is 45:18), Wisdom from above (Jas, 1 Cor).

Narcissistic Individualism—*Problems*: narcissism which limits our focus to ourselves and our wants and needs so that we can't see the needs and desires of others, including God, and we don't care. Involvement only in what interests or benefits us, dissolution of and disregard for community. Lack of connection and loneliness. Isolation. *Solutions*: *unity and diversity, community component, inclusivity*. Body of Christ (1 Cor 12-14).

Restless Impatience and Information Overload—*Problems*: pace of life, too much information, anxiety, stress, impatience, trying to make decisions quickly. *Solutions*: *prayer/spiritual guidance, giftedness of others and diversity of the body, and divine insight; don't have to trust only own wisdom and insight*. God's timing (Eccl 2:12), and inscrutability of God (Job).

Pragmatism—*Problems*: worldly wisdom, right in own eyes, self-sufficient spirit, using rather than serving people. *Solutions*: *prayer/spiritual guidance, true wisdom, recognizing people as gifts rather than tools*. The fear of the Lord (Prv 1:7; 9:10; Ps. 111:10), wise in own eyes (Prv 3:7; 26:12, Gn 3).

Guardianship—*Problems*: leaders rather than equipping and empowering the community to hear God together, view themselves as the community's visionary and benefactor because of their education and status, lack of buy-in for community, power/control issues. *Solutions*: *leader sees role as equipper/facilitator for community called by Christ, gifts of the spirit, inclusivity in decision-making and discernment*. Leaders as "under-shepherds" and fellow "Christ-follower" (Joel 2:28-32, Jer 31:31-33; Mt 20:25).

Spiritual mysticism: *Problems*: tends to be individualistic, not discerning between godly and demonic leading to heresy and problems, spiritual experience-focused rather than God-focused, emphasis on personal spiritual development rather than knowing God and doing his will. *Solutions*:—*community component, wisdom component, training in discernment, accountability to the community*. Wisdom from above (Jas, 1 Cor).

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The process by which decision is reached tells of the nature of the group in a way other forms of ritual sometimes miss. Perhaps a community loudly proclaims its democratic lifestyle—and at work, rest, and meals, the members hold all things equally. But if the community's decisions are made by executive decree, the claim to equality is empty; the group actually has an authoritarian structure. Conversely, if decisions on entrance and advancement, leadership and responsibility are made by a genuinely popular vote, that process reveals the group to be democratic in a way that propaganda never could. . . .

Property, gender, or age qualifications for voting give specific shading to the kind of democracy this is. The fact that we vote to make decisions tells us that we are a democracy. The fact that not all of us who are members of the group can vote tells us that this democracy is not absolute but relative. If it is possible for a member to lose a vote, that tells us how seriously we take responsibility or deviance. And if members of a group have the vote but do not use it, we learn of a profound alienation of the members from the life of the group.”⁷

Luke Timothy Johnson

DECISION MAKING AT LAKESIDE CHURCH⁸

Less than a third of the members of Lakeside Church were gathered for a quarterly congregational meeting to vote on a new set of church policies and procedures, which had been distributed to the congregation two weeks before. After checking that there were enough people to meet the quorum requirements, and a brief prayer and devotion on the importance of unity, the Chair announced that the question/ discussion time would be limited to issues of clarification, since concerns should have been expressed in writing to the revision committee prior to the meeting. She reminded those assembled that the committee, of which she was a part, had worked many hours on the documents and the congregation's job was to approve them, not change them. The agenda for this meeting was a full one so discussion would be restricted to twenty minutes.

Fred nervously shifted in his seat and leaned over to his wife, saying, “Looks like they're railroading it through. I wonder if anyone will try to object.” She nodded and scanned the room, noting that several leaders, who sometimes verbally disagreed with the Chair during congregational and church council meetings, were absent. Ten minutes into the discussion, Charles, a former member of the council, raised concerns that he had already given to the committee, and suggested a possible change to deal with them. He was promptly gaveled down

⁷Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1893, 1996), 15-16.

⁸ This is based on a true story, with extra elements added to enhance the scenario.

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by the Chair as being out of order and, in spite of his protests, asked to sit down. The tension in the air was palpable.

John, whose wife Susan was on the church staff, slowly made his way to the microphone. He asked if the staff agreed with the revisions, since the church was currently without a senior pastor, and some changes affected the job descriptions and day-to-day activities of the pastoral staff. He was assured they all had agreed and that their concerns had been addressed. He was stunned by this response since he knew his wife hadn't heard back from the committee about the detailed six-page letter she had sent them several weeks before. When he paused trying to make sense of what he had just heard, the Chair asked if anyone else wished to ask a clarifying question, "since time is moving on." John hurried to sit down.

Carol, a long-time member and one of the prayer warriors in the church, stood quickly and asked if the congregation could pause for a short time of prayer and reflection before a vote was taken. The Chair replied that members should have been praying about these changes on their own and, "We have already asked God to bless the meeting in the opening prayer."

Carol was followed by Jane, a member of the revision committee, who talked emotionally about how much time and effort they had put into developing the new policies and procedures, and how the committee was really looking forward to the process being done. She suggested that the congregation needed to trust them, respect their wisdom, and honor their work by voting "yes" on the measure. She then called for the question. Her appeal apparently worked because the congregation voted to accept the documents without further discussion, although it was close, with only a few votes separating the "winners" from the "losers." The church Chair briskly led the congregation through the rest of the agenda, pausing only occasionally to allow brief discussion. After the closing prayer she thanked the congregation for their attendance and for a successful meeting.

After the meeting Fred grumbled to his wife as they left, "I don't know why I even bother coming to these meetings. Our thoughts and opinions aren't important. I think God must be pretty disgusted and saddened by all of this. I know I am." Another church member was overheard to say, "I'm not sure what all the fuss was about. I didn't bother to read the papers they gave us. I've got enough stuff to read already, and they were pretty complicated, so I just voted 'yes.'" His companion responded, "Well, I voted 'yes' because I didn't want to disappoint the committee. They've worked so long on this. And besides, I'm not sure it makes much

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difference. The council runs the church the way they want to anyway, and I don't think these changes will have much of an impact on me."

When the new senior pastor began at the church three months later, he largely ignored the new policies and procedures, saying to a staff member, "I was hired to lead. This congregational polity thing is the pits! It's more important to just get done what you want to get done. You know the saying, 'Easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.'" As he embarked on implementing his vision for the church, he found himself regularly in disagreement with lay leaders, church staff, and in particular, the church Chair. Needless to say, the pastor did not last long, and the church continued to have meetings where unresolved conflict was the norm.

What cultural influences did you notice at work at Lakeside Church's business meeting (Rationalism, Naturalism, Narcissistic Individualism, Restless Impatience and Information Overload, Pragmatism, Guardianship, Mystical Experience and Spirituality)?

What process did Lakeside Church use to make a congregational decision and what does that tell us tell us about its "nature?"

Although it claimed to be congregational in its polity, what polity/polities did they actually seem to use? Why?

How was the policies and procedures motion developed and presented to the congregation? Why didn't all contributions seem to be allowed and valued?

What role/roles did the leaders play in the discernment/decision-making process? Why?

Is the way Lakeside Church made decisions different from how secular local businesses or government groups make theirs? Why or why not? If it is, how is it different?

What role did God play in the decision-making process? Did church members act as functional atheists in their decision-making? Why or why not?

What are some of the long-lasting results of Lakeside's decision-making process?

Was this a "successful meeting"? What criteria determine "success" in deciding this church's business/following God's will? What criteria should be used and how are they determined?

Discernment and Decision Making in the Early Church of Acts

The selection of Matthias by drawing lots (Acts 1:12-26). Traditional way of making decisions before giving of the Holy Spirit.

The selection of apostolic assistants/deacons (Acts 6). Note the emphasis on the community choosing persons who were both full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.

The selection and sending of Paul and Barnabas by the church in Antioch (Acts 13).

Perhaps the most astonishing feature of that incendiary fellowship was their sense of corporate guidance. ... Having become a prepared people they received the call *together*.⁹
Richard Foster

“Set apart *for me* Barnabas and Saul.” The Spirit was claiming these two men for a special mission. Think of the spiritual drama as the living Spirit put his finger on these two individuals in the midst of the other leaders and possibly the whole congregation.

The Spirit has his own strategy and plans for the church. Notice the wording of verse 2: “... for the work to which *I* have called them.”¹⁰

Jim Cymbala

No Bible doctrines, precious and vital as they are to us, can replace this kind of daily, specific leading by the Spirit of God. The leaders in Antioch could have read the whole Old Testament, inspired by God as it is, and yet never have known that the Holy Spirit wanted to send out Paul and Barnabas specifically. It took a direct intervention by the Spirit to get God’s work going God’s way.¹¹

Jim Cymbala

The Jerusalem Council on the inclusion of the Gentiles (Acts 15)

If both Jews and Gentiles are to be considered part of God’s people, will it be on even or uneven footing? On what basis will Gentiles be recognized and associated with? On the basis of their belief in the Messiah and the gift of the Holy Spirit, or on the basis of being circumcised and observing the law of Moses? Will the Church split into two ethnically and ritually distinct bodies? Is Yahweh a tribal deity, or Lord of all? Will fellowship be determined by faith, or by precedent; by the experience of God, or by the rules of the community? At stake is the Church’s identity as witness to the work of God. Will the Church decide to recognize and acknowledge actions of God that go beyond its present understanding, or will it demand that God work within its categories?¹²

Luke Timothy Johnson

⁹Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 152.

¹⁰Jim Cymbala, *Fresh Power: Experiencing the Vast Resources of the Spirit of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), 143.

¹¹Cymbala, *Fresh Power*, 144.

¹²L. T. Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 90-91.

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1. ***There was a big argument:*** “Certain individuals” differed with Paul and Barnabas on the question of circumcision, and “no small dissension and debate” arose (Acts 15:1-2).
2. ***The Church sought out a forum in which all parties could be heard:*** The local faith community took action, and appointed “Paul and Barnabas and some of the others to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders” (Acts 15:2).
3. ***People in conflict had opportunity to tell their stories:*** The delegation of disputants arrived at Jerusalem and “reported all that God had done with them” (Acts 15:4).
4. ***There was enough time to air convictions, feelings and perspectives:*** There was “much debate” (Acts 15:7).
5. ***Leaders, after careful listening, proposed a way forward that took into account concerns raised by both sides on this issue:*** “After they finished speaking, James replied, ‘My brothers ... I have reached the decision that we should not trouble [with circumcision] those Gentiles who are turning to God ... but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication’” (Acts 15:13-21)
6. ***The proposed solution was ratified by consensus:*** With the “consent of the whole church” the leaders at Jerusalem sent a delegation to Antioch to convey the agreements reached (Acts 15:22, 25).
7. ***The entire decision making process was handled with sensitivity to all participants, under Holy Spirit guidance:*** The end result “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28).¹³

Nelson Kraybill

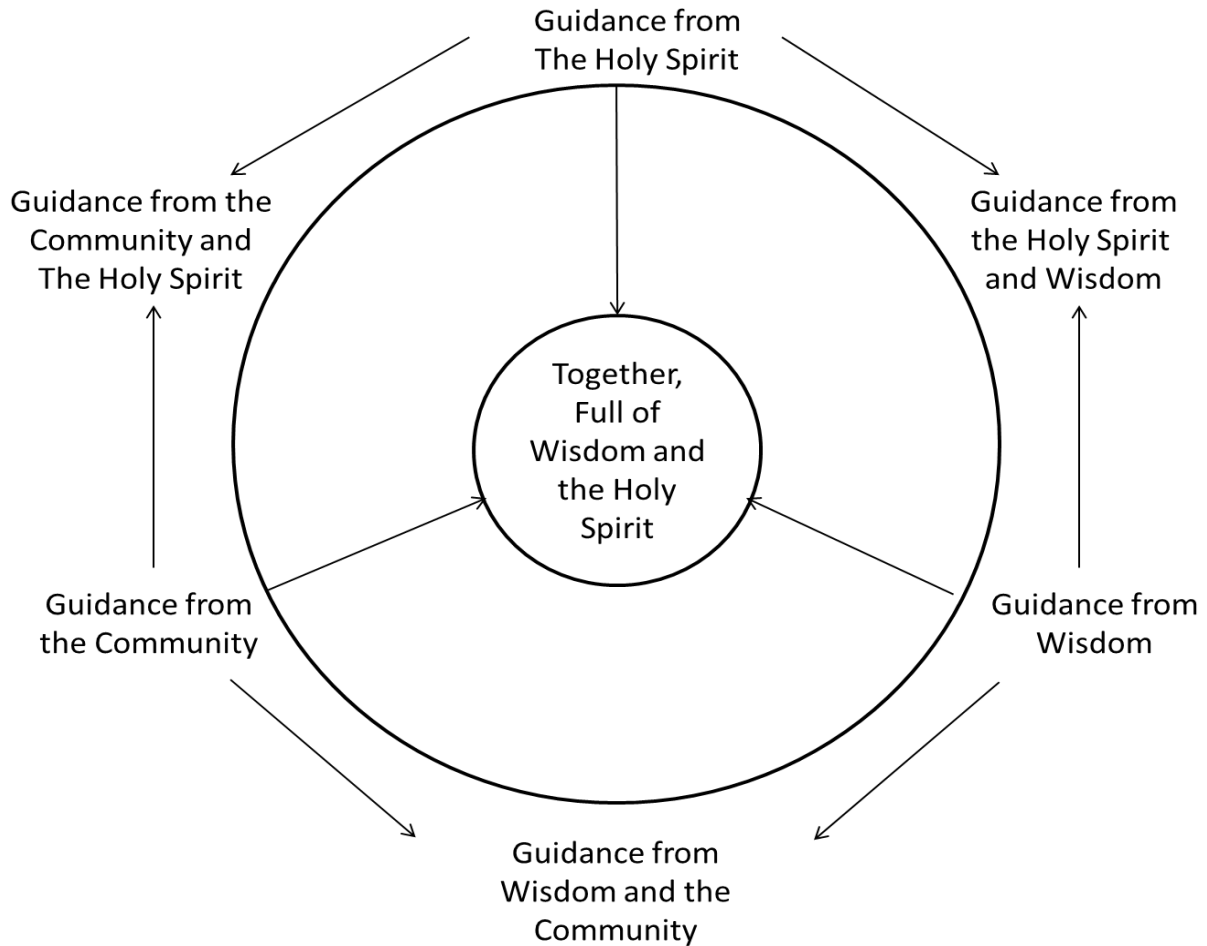
As a people they had decided to live under the direct rulership of the Spirit. They had rejected both human totalitarianism and anarchy. They had even rejected democracy, that is, majority rule. They had dared to live on the basis of Spirit-rule; no 51 percent vote, no compromises, but Spirit-directed unity. And it worked.¹⁴

Richard Foster

¹³Nelson Kraybill, “At 11: Conflict and Church Decision Making.” L.T. Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 108, points out various aspect of the Early Church’s decision-making process: “the active role of the assembly and not just leaders; the importance of silence and prayer for discernment to take place; the necessity of opposition and debate openly carried out; the significance of personal and pastoral communication of decisions once made.” In his discussion on Acts 15 he focuses on: “the experience of God, the narrative of that experience, its discernment, and the interpretation of the Word of God.”

¹⁴Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 153. Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament*, 211-212, agrees: “in the New Testament there are no majority decisions, but that efforts are made to arrive at a right judgment, even though the discussions are by no means easy or harmonious, till those of differing views can unite. Where no such understanding can be reached, the matter is taken so seriously in the New Testament examples that the Church has to summon up the courage to point out to the dissident(s) that they are repudiating the gospel, and to warn them of God’s judgment, or even to pronounce it.”

A Better Way: Guidance from Wisdom, the Holy Spirit and the Community



Three Main Elements of Congregational Guidance

- **Guidance from Wisdom:** *Bible, tradition, experience, education, “natural” wisdom (1 Kings 3; Prov. 4)*
- **Guidance from the Holy Spirit:** *Spiritual gifts/anointing, prophecy, listening prayer (John 16:12-15; 1 Cor 12-14, James 1:5)*
- **Guidance from the Community:** *Insights, needs, desires, and opinions of congregation members (1 Cor. 12;14:26)*

Summary of Seven Models of Congregational Guidance

Guidance from Wisdom (Tradition, Bible, Natural Wisdom) Model Characteristics:

- *Sources of decision making authority:* Bible, tradition, experience, “natural” wisdom.
- *Leadership roles:* Teacher, preacher, knowledgeable authority, skilled expert, coach, planner, problem-solver, executive, disciplinarian.
- *Roles of Members:* Students, disciples, workers.
- *Processes/Structures:* Education, logical argument, Bible teaching; worship service as “teaching time;” goal to apply wise principles to give guidance; developing and presenting plans to solve problems.
- *View of the Church:* Gathering of those who have chosen to follow God’s wise law found in nature, Scripture, and tradition.
- *Strengths/Benefits:* Values wisdom, Bible knowledge, tradition, education, and learning from experience; provides objective standard/guidance for discernment between the wise/good and the evil/foolish; uses business skill to promote efficiency, success.
- *Weaknesses/Problems:* Lack of contemporary guidance by the Spirit, congregational involvement, and accountability; Bible as a “rule” book of moral principles; provides general but not specific guidance; anxiety over limited knowledge (information overload); can be static, legalistic, individualistic, rationalistic, naturalistic, pragmatic with a tendency towards self-sufficiency; promotes guardianship by the leaders over less wise and informed members, and a search for quick magic formulas to deal with problems.

Guidance from the Holy Spirit Model Characteristics:

- *Sources of decision making authority:* “Spirit” anointing that can be confused/ associated with a leader’s dynamic “charismatic” personality.
- *Leadership roles:* Prophet, “anointed” preacher, Spirit-led leader, individuals chosen based on perceived “anointing.” Leader as visionary.
- *Roles of Members:* Follow the leadings of the Spirit individually and corporately, follow the leaders as they follow the Spirit, test the “spirits.”
- *Processes/Structures:* Open times of prayer and prophecy in worship services and other occasions; sharing of individual guidance. Leader as “vision-caster” for congregation.
- *View of the Church:* Gathering of those called, gifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit.
- *Strengths/Benefits:* Allows room for God to make his will known to his people; promotes dependence upon God and the possibility of specific guidance for a given situation. Lessens the information overload pressure to “know everything.” Appeals to those who long to experience

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God in their lives, countering rationalism, pragmatism, and naturalism. Encourages dependence and waiting on God which helps counter restless impatience.

- *Weaknesses/Problems:* Can lead to individualized narcissistic “spirituality,” the hierarchical guardianship of the “visionary,” competing leaders/visions claiming God’s leading, a lack of responsibility for decision-making (Spirit dictating action), “cult” leadership, and false teaching if there is little training for and means of “testing the spirits.”

Guidance from the Community Model Characteristics:

- *Sources of decision making authority:* the “will of the people” or more accurately the “will of a collection of individuals.”
- *Leadership roles:* initiator, facilitator, and organizer of the process, guide, promoter of a position, or leader of the opposition.
- *Roles of Members:* voters, deciders.
- *Processes/Structures:* voting, consensus, debate, negotiation, *Robert’s Rules*, parliamentary procedure, democratic congregationalism.
- *View of the Church:* gathering of believing individuals who come together for support and encouragement in the pursuit of mutually decided-upon goals.
- *Strengths/Benefits:* affirms the equality of the members of the body (body of Christ) and allows all to contribute and participate in decision-making, variety of opinions/ perspectives/ insights expressed. Increased ownership of decisions by members. Guardianship is discouraged and the congregation is involved in decision making at many different levels.
- *Weaknesses/Problems:* disunity due to frustrations about losing or not being heard. Inability to resolve differences as it tends to be oppositional in nature. Voting blocks and silo mentality. Can emphasize narcissistic individualism and self-seeking (each person voting for what they want) with a focus on the will of the people and the will of God being neglected. Pressure to conform. Information overload can be a problem with discussions being just a sharing of ignorance and prejudice. Voters can be relativistic, open to manipulation, false teaching, and misinformation since there is no objective wise standard for measuring against. Can be rationalistic, pragmatic, and naturalistic, but also involve false mystical spirituality.

Guidance from Wisdom and the Holy Spirit Model Characteristics:

- *Sources of decision-making authority:* anointing of the Spirit plus traditional, natural, and biblical wisdom.
- *Leadership roles:* Individual chosen on basis of tradition, Bible knowledge, wisdom, and spirituality. “Anointed” by the Spirit and set apart by the church for ministry.

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- *Roles of Members*: learners, doers of the pastor-defined or traditional vision.
- *Processes/Structures*: pastor/leader focused, monarchical/hierarchical.
- *View of the Church*: Gathering of those who have chosen to follow God's wise law, and are called, gifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit to do so.
- *Strengths/Benefits*: values wisdom and learning from experience, tradition, Bible knowledge, as well as encouraging dependence upon God and allowing for the possibility of specific divine guidance for a given situation. Can be efficient and make decisions quickly. Provides checks on mystical spirituality, rationalism, naturalism, and pragmatism.
- *Weaknesses/Problems*: Weak in community involvement. Tendency to elevate the "wise" and "spiritual," which can lead to "divine right" to rule, domination and abuse of power. Conflict between wisdom sources and Spirit guidance; limited perspective due to individualism; strong tendency towards guardianship. Leader burnout due to information overload and unrealistic expectations to be all-knowing and all-spiritual.

Guidance from the Holy Spirit and the Community Model Characteristics:

- *Sources of decision making authority*: "inner light," the guidance of the Spirit, community agreement, the "will of the people."
- *Leadership Roles*: initiator, facilitator, and supporter of process; encourager of member involvement and openness. Special recognized role of "weighty" influential people.
- *Roles of Members*: discerners, deciders.
- *Processes/Structures*: Meeting to worship and do business, silent listening prayer and deliberation, sharing of "leadings," consensus building, use of lots.
- *View of the Church*: Gathering of those called, gifted, empowered, and guided by the Holy Spirit who come together to support and encourage each other in the pursuit of mutually discerned goals.
- *Strengths/Benefits*: Consensus building is unifying for the congregation. Increased ownership for decisions by members. Slower process challenges restless impatience and allows for more consideration of relevant wisdom input and for all to share opinions and insights, dealing with information overload. Discourages rationalism, naturalism, pragmatism, and narcissistic individualism, and guardianship because of emphasis on seeking God's will together. Can be very creative in problem solving.
- *Weaknesses/Problems*: can be weak on use of wisdom and the Bible which can lead to a lessened ability to "test the spirits" and evaluate mystical experiences and guidance. Avoidance of decision-making responsibility. Decision making takes time and can be less efficient.

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Guidance from the Community and Wisdom Model Characteristics:

- *Sources of decision making authority:* combination of wisdom from tradition, the Bible, experience and the “will of the people.”
- *Leadership Roles:* elders, leadership team members, council member, delegated responsibility, often chosen because of wisdom and expertise.
- *Roles of Members:* participate in meetings, elect or choose those with delegated authority, abide by leaders’ decisions.
- *View of the Church:* Gathering of those who have chosen to follow God’s wise law, recorded both in nature and in Scripture, and embodied in tradition, who come together for support and encouragement in the pursuit of mutually decided-upon goals.
- *Processes/Structures:* discussion and debate, logical argumentation from wisdom sources, group evaluation of problems and solutions, councils, elder boards, leadership teams, prayers to make good decisions.
- *Strengths/Benefits:* diminishes guardianship and increases ownership of decisions as it values community input; checks and balances on power of leader; variety of insights/perspectives/giftings (body of Christ); affirms value of wisdom, including Bible; can be more efficient than just community guidance model; counters narcissistic individualism by community involvement, and false teaching and mystical experience with wisdom; less of a problem with information overload as evaluation responsibilities are shared.
- *Weaknesses/Problems:* Weak on guidance from God, can be quite naturalistic, rationalistic, impatient and pragmatic. Can lead to guardianship by leaders if there is a lack of input from congregation; silo mentality; no specific guidance. Can have conflict between Biblical teaching and “will of the people.”

Proposed Model: Guidance from Wisdom, the Holy Spirit and the Community (Act 2:16-21; Joel 2:28-32; Ezek 36:22-28; 37:14; 39:29)

- *Sources of decision making authority:* A combination of wisdom from tradition, the Bible, experience, the “will of the people,” and guidance by the Holy Spirit; communal discernment.
- *Leadership Roles:* Individuals chosen on basis of tradition, Bible knowledge, wisdom, and spirituality. “Anointed” by the Spirit and the church for ministry as part of the body. Initiators, supporters, and guides of discernment process.

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- *Roles of Members:* Exercising gifting as part of the body of Christ, sharing insights from the Holy Spirit and wisdom from experience, tradition, and study of Scripture. Learners, discerners and decision makers.
- *View of the Church:* The people of God, created in his image with reasoning and governing abilities for exercising dominion, empowered and gifted by the Holy Spirit for discernment and ministry.
- *Processes/Structures:* Discussion, dialogue, argumentation from wisdom sources, silent prayer and discernment, consensus building about the will of God for the community. Education and experience of all valued. Spiritual guidance through listening prayer also valued. Goal to communally share wisdom, experience, knowledge, and insights from the Holy Spirit to develop and agree together on solutions for problems and vision for the future.
- *Strengths/Benefits:* Values wisdom, Bible knowledge, tradition, education, and learning from experience; provides objective standard/guidance for discernment between the wise/good and the evil/foolish. Also is able to use business skill and insights when appropriate to promote efficiency and effectiveness. Promotes unity and increased ownership of decisions. Individualism and information overload are countered as it affirms the equality of the members of the body (body of Christ) and allows all to contribute and participate in decision-making and express a variety of opinions/perspectives/insights/giftings. Guardianship is discouraged, community input is valued and the congregation is involved in decision making at many different levels. Rationalism, naturalism and pragmatism are countered by the involvement of the Holy Spirit who may give specific supernatural, creative, and unexpected guidance which goes beyond human wisdom. Allows room for God to make his will known to his people, with the possibility of specific guidance for a given situation. Encourages dependence and waiting on God which helps counter restless impatience as one cannot “force” God to speak. False mystical spirituality is countered by the community’s “testing of spirits” using the sources of wisdom and discernment.
- *Weaknesses/Problems:* Each of the three components (guidance from Wisdom, the Holy Spirit, and the Community) acts as a balance for the other two and helps counter their weaknesses. If one or two of the components is devalued or neglected then model can have the weaknesses associated with those lacks. Difficulties in gaining the balance between the three sources of guidance and understanding the relationship between them: Is one superior to the other? Are they to be ordered sequentially? Or is there a continual back-and-forth movement where the two are interspersed? Or is there an “incarnating” of God’s Spirit in human wisdom so that they operate simultaneously and cooperatively? Also, there may be questions about when and how much the congregation should participate in various decisions.

Particular Concerns for All Models

- *“One-size-doesn’t-fit-all”*: Each congregation is different due to cultural/historical/theological/ personality/ missional differences. Each will be stronger in one or two of the three key elements than another. The congregation needs to strengthen the weak element so that it balances the others in a healthy way. Growth will mean trying new things to strengthen that element while not neglecting the others. Different models of discernment decision making put emphasis more on one element than another, and it may be helpful to adopt one that is strong in the element that the congregation is weak. On the other hand, it may be helpful to choose one that is somewhat closer to the model used currently, so that the transition is more gradual. The point is not to adopt a particular model, but to facilitate the healthy use of all three elements in congregational discernment and decision making.
- *Corporate church spirituality is based on individual member spirituality*: This kind of decision making requires that congregation members are seeking to grow in their faith, in their ability to hear God, and in their relationships with fellow members. This is a good thing! But sometimes there will be resistance because “it is too hard, it requires too much of me.” The problem is not with doing discernment based decision making. Often, the problem is an unwillingness to grow and take discipleship seriously. Early Covenanters often asked each other “How goes it with your walk with the LORD?” because they knew a vital growing relationship with Christ was essential.
- *“Cessationism,” functional atheism, and listening to God*: Some believers have been taught that the Holy Spirit stopped talking directly to people and that supernatural gifts of the Spirit ceased after the canon of Scripture was completed in the 3rd century. This is historically inaccurate and biblically unsupportable. Unfortunately this belief is quite common and has led to a “functional atheism” regarding discernment and decision making. It is often supported by negative experiences with “false revelation” and the lack of personal experience with God speaking. What is needed is not to ban God’s direct communication with his people, but to teach listening and discernment skills so that believers learn to hear the voice of God and distinguish it from other voices.
- *“Godly Indifference,” the attitude behind the process*: A key to healthy discernment decision making is a willingness to let go of one’s own opinions and desires, and listen to God and to others. Sometimes this is very difficult, especially if one is heavily invested in a particular outcome, and attempts at manipulation of the process may be made. But the key question is, “Do I want my will to be done, or God’s will? And if I want God’s will, what do I need to let go of, so that I can hear what He wants?”
- *Trust between congregation leaders/members, members/members, and leaders/leaders*: If there are low levels of trust between the members and leaders of a congregation it is hard to seek God’s will together. Members and leaders will always have in the back of their minds that the others are out to “get something” or impose their own wills, or “crazy,” or spiritually immature, and therefore can’t be trusted to have the interests of the congregation in mind. This lack of trust needs to be taken seriously, and efforts taken to air differences, learn to

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really listen to each other, seek and give forgiveness, and rebuild trust before there will be much success in discerning God's will together. Behavioral covenants can help with this.

- *Theologies of the “body of Christ” and the role of leadership:* This kind of discernment/ decision making can be very threatening to leaders who are used to a “guardianship” or CEO model of leadership. It takes at least some of the decision-making power out of their hands and gives it to the congregation. If a leader is on board with making decisions in this way, he/she will see themselves as a facilitator of the process (a very important role) and seek to help the congregation make the best decision that it can. If the leader is threatened and doesn't support this kind of decision making they will try to subvert and sabotage it to regain power. Much of the issue comes down to the question, who is the head of the congregation, Jesus or the pastor? Is the congregation there to do the leader's plans for the congregation or Jesus'? Is the congregation the “body of Christ” or the leader's “working group”? The idea of a “first follower (Leonard Sweet).
- *Taking the time for discernment:* Some people are concerned that this kind of discernment/ decision making takes too much time. Often, initially it does take more time up-front, as people get used to doing it. It does require that people spend more time in preparation and prayer than they may be accustomed to (just showing up for the meeting after glancing at the meeting documents won't do!). But the benefits outweigh the costs. Congregational support/ buy-in is much greater with this type of process, and there are fewer “fences to mend” and “ruffled feathers” to soothe. In reality, the time taken to come to congregational agreement using discernment may be much less than the time needed to deal with the disunity, anger, feelings of disenfranchisement, and lack of support for the decision that can come with a contentious vote.
- *Focusing on short-term vs. long-term goals:* the question is often raised, “Do we have to decide everything through discernment? Can't we just delegate some stuff to people we trust and let them decide?” Yes! Most churches already have criteria as to what needs to come before the congregation and what is the responsibility of the staff or other volunteers. Delegated authority still is valid. The church does not need to discern the color of paper for the bulletins! Usually decisions that require or are improved by the involvement and assent of the congregation are long-term ones related to the vision, mission, and values of the congregation and the hiring of pastors/staff. However, any topic/issue that is controversial, where there is great emotional investment, or where the participation of the congregation is needed for its implementation, should probably be brought to the congregation for discernment.
- *Losses and gains in changing processes/models:* There always is a learning curve and resistance to change when trying new processes in a congregation. The familiar is comfortable, even if it isn't very healthy or helpful. Discernment decision making relies on a congregation that has been prepared well to listen to God and to each other, and this will require extra time for the staff and the congregation. They may need to learn to hear God's voice clearly for themselves individually before they are able to join together to hear it for the congregation. Changing from a parliamentary or “business” decision making model may also require an adjustment in both thinking and expectations.

The Ignatian Model of Communal Discernment

John Carroll Futrell, S.J., “Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience,”
Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits 4, no. 5 (November, 1972): 159-192.¹⁵

This Ignatian model of communal discernment was developed by John Carroll Futrell from his “analysis of the Deliberation of 1539, wherein Ignatius and his first companions communally discerned that God called them to found the Company of Jesus” (170). Futrell insists, “much preparation is required before it is possible to begin the actual deliberation to discern the corporate election. Unless this preparation has been completed, the method of deliberation not only cannot be successful, it may, as a matter of fact, be disastrous” (170).

Preparation

1. Select a proposal which is “real and important,” and involves “a truly binding corporate commitment to communal being and/or action (170-171).

2. Gather and make available “all possible evidence...to all who will engage in the deliberation” (171).

3. Clarify the evidence “in such a way that all the ‘discerners’ understand the issues in the same way (171)”

a. “There is a clear GOAL which all understand and which all unanimously recognize as a goal which they are called to achieve” (171).

b. “The actual matter for deliberation is made up of possible specific means to achieve the stated goal” (171).

c. “The proposal for deliberation is expressed in the structure: Goal.....
Specific How To’s: 1..... 2..... 3..... 4 or more indefinitely” (172).

4. Participants “individually and prayerfully” discern the movements of the Holy Spirit within themselves as they reflect upon the evidence for and against the specific ‘how to’s’ proposed.”(172).

“The deliberation itself begins, therefore, only when all possible evidence has been gathered, clarified through discussion, and individually discerned, and when the active love of God in history has indicated through events that there is no more time for preparation, but a decision must be made now” (172).

A. The Steps in the Ignatian Method of Deliberation (172-173)

1. Prayer Begin with prayer for light from the Holy Spirit, perhaps including an invitation to shared spontaneous prayer for a few moments. It might be well to situate the prayer by reading from the Scriptures, writings of the founder, or other documents expressing the spirit of the community.

¹⁵See also Stephen Daryl Robison, “The Ignatian Model of Communal Discernment” *God at Our Planning Table: Spiritual Discernment as a Viable Alternative for Church Planning and Programming*, D. Min. Project/Thesis, Wesley Theological Seminary, WA D.C., May 1989, 62-64.

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2. Sharing Cons Each person reports from his own individual discernment the reasons he has seen which militate against the proposed choice. These are recorded.

3. Prayer At least a brief break. This must be long enough for each one prayerfully to reflect upon the results of step 2.

4. Sharing Pros and Checking Consensus Each person reports from his own individual discernment the reasons he has seen which favor the proposed choice. These are recorded. At the end of this step find out whether it is already immediately clear to everyone from the recorded con and pro reasons what the election should be. If so, go immediately to step 7. If not, proceed to step 5.

5. Prayer A break period for each one prayerfully to reflect upon the results of step 4 in the light of those of step 2.

6. Evaluation and Discovery The effort is made now to evaluate the weight of the reasons con and pro recorded and then, in the light of this evidence, communally to discern the choice to which the community is called by God. If the Holy Spirit is working through the second and time of election, and if the conditions of authentic communal discernment have been fulfilled, the decision finally should be clear, and confirmation should be experienced unanimously through shared deep peace---finding God together.

7. Prayer The deliberation session should end with a prayer of thanksgiving and of offering the election to the Father with a reaffirmation of corporate commitment to carry out the decision. Perhaps this could include an invitation to spontaneous shared prayer.

“The entire process of spiritual discernment is prayer. Consequently it is vital to establish an atmosphere of prayer, of openness to the Holy Spirit and to one another, and of shared awareness of the charismatic communion which the persons are seeking “how to” realize here and now through their communally discerned decision. Should this prayerful atmosphere of conscious openness and communion wane during the deliberation, the group should stop and enter into prayer again” (173-174).

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Quaker Group Discernment

handout by Lon Fendall and Jan Wood, Good News Associates, Leadership Institute for Group Discernment, George Fox Univ., Newberg, OR, May 17-20, 2010

If you were doing business using a system of voting, you would know the simple principles: The information is presented to the group. A discussion follows with people debating the various facets of the issue. Some may try to persuade others of the superiority of their opinion. In due time, a vote is taken. A decision is made. A minute records the action.

There are also simple principles for a meeting that is seeking God's guidance.

1. Group aligns with God's Spirit.
2. Information is presented to the group.
3. The group waits in Listening silence to perceive what God's Spirit is communicating.
4. They work together to see how these perceptions fit together.
5. When they have a common sense of "yesness", the Clerk/Leader articulates this understanding.
6. The decision is written into a Minute.
7. It is read to the group to double check that it has captured both the spirit and the facts of the decision.
8. Each participant honors the decision as a Leading from God.

I. GROUP ALIGNS WITH GOD'S SPIRIT. *Key Goal: To be one with God's heart/perspective/ Spirit.*

Personal Preparation:

Forgiveness of any that you fear, disrespect, etc.

Be fully invested in Listening.

Fully release your "Listenings" to the gathered group for God to use/not use.

Group preparation: Worship

Telling the truth of the situation and ourselves in it.

II. INFORMATION IS PRESENTED TO THE GROUP. *Key Goal: To empower the group to discern well!*

Before the Meeting: for those who are presenting

Divide the decision into manageable chunks.

Provide group with appropriate information in a timely manner.

Verify that key players will be available.

Allow enough time for the group to make the decision successfully.

Ask God for guidance if there are any persons who need to be talked with before the meeting.

At the Meeting:

Present the issue in clear, neutral language that makes it clear what is being asked of the group.

Present appropriate information in a digestible form.

Handouts, Power Point, Charts, etc.

Tell the truth of what the group brings to this Listening process.

Tell the narrative of the process of work and the Leadings of God up to this point.

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After the Meeting:

Follow through on all items requiring action.

Relate both the process and the decision to appropriate audiences who were not part of the Gathered Meeting.

III. THE GROUP WAITS IN LISTENING SILENCE TO PERCEIVE WHAT GOD'S SPIRIT IS COMMUNICATING *Key goal: Seek God's wisdom collaboratively.*

Go into Listening silence.

Release all the thoughts that are filling your mind. This includes laying aside concerns that are not appropriate to the meeting. It includes all the ideas and opinions you have brought into the meeting.

Make sure you are holding each participant in respect. Release our judgments.

Forgive anyone who is getting crosswise with us.

Go silent inside and out. Hold the idea up for God to communicate with you.

Pay attention to what happens in your thinking, feelings, body, spirit.

IV. GROUP MEMBERS WORK TOGETHER TO SEE HOW THESE PERCEPTIONS FIT TOGETHER *Key Goal: To be in the mystery and let God unfold the group knowing*

People share what is coming to them in the Listening.

For your speaking:

It may be whole thoughts, ideas, solutions. It may be a fragment of an idea, a mental image. You may not understand how it is related to the whole. Just offer up your piece.

Speak it and then let go of it! Neither micro-manage the idea—nor worry if you said something silly or wrong. You simply gave your gift.

For your listening:

You are Listening for God's guidance through the various gifts of the group. It is like assembling a jigsaw puzzle. Each piece is legitimate; you simply have no idea how they fit together.

Don't argue with what you are hearing. Simply receive it—and continuously ask God to show what this piece might contribute to the whole.

Let a few seconds of silence space the various persons speaking. This isn't a mechanistic act; it is the chance to let the speaker's words find a place in your Listening.

Don't be alarmed if folks are saying opposite things. Don't be alarmed if a person gets emotional or doesn't do it right. Listen under—and grace them.

Reflective Listening . . . of God

Clerk/Leader moves into a gentle trial and error of trying to see what the patterns might be. Does anyone have a sense of how God is leading for Way Forward?

Name what is true for the group. Let the knowing be as simple or complex as it may be.

As possible Leadings emerge, try them on to see if they stay clear as a group. If there is dis-ease expressed, consider that good information.

If there is continued "yesness", move on to the decision with joy.

Have total freedom to move in and out of silence and speaking. Prayer and worship. If the group is small, the Clerk/Leader may let this happen quite naturally. If the group is large, persons would raise their hand or stand at a microphone and wait to be recognized.

V. WHEN THE GROUP HAS A COMMON SENSE OF YESNESS, THE CLERK/LEADER ARTICULATES THIS UNDERSTANDING. *Key Goal: To accept God's Leading for this decision and prepare to be faithful.*

The Clerk/Leader names the next step/decision.

The Clerk/Leader asks if we are clear to accept or approve this decision.

VI. THE DECISION IS WRITTEN INTO A MINUTE. *Key Goal: To articulate the truth of what the group has done and is deciding*

The Recording Clerk/Secretary writes the Minute and reads it back to the group to see if it captures the truth of what God has done among us.

VII. THE MINUTE IS READ TO THE GROUP TO DOUBLE-CHECK THAT IT HAS CAPTURED BOTH THE SPIRIT AND THE FACTS OF THE DECISION. *Key Goal: To verify this understanding.*

The group agrees or suggests changes.

If some cannot be clear to proceed, there are two choices:

I cannot unite with this Minute. While there may be rare and unique situations in which a group would continue despite someone's standing in the way, the usual course is that it reopens the door to see what aspect is not clear and what Way Forward might be.

I stand aside. This means that I don't have clearness from God to stop this action, but it does seem important/faithful to have my perspective noted.

Once the decision is agreed upon, every participant is obligated to honor this as God's Leading.

VIII. EACH PARTICIPANT HONORS THE DECISION AS A LEADING FROM GOD.

Key Goal: To honor Christ who has led this group in this step

INFORMAL GLOSSARY: *New processes are helped by having some new vocabulary. Here are some words that may give some language to this endeavor.*

Clear *Absence of any discernment dis-ease. No inner hindrances.*

Clerk *The leader of Meetings for Business in Quaker polity.*

Gathered Meeting *The group who Listened to God together.*

Knowings *Things that you know that you know.*

Leadings *The motions of being Led by God. Wisdom. Solutions. Nudges. Ahas.*

Listening *Listening to God through direct apprehension and through Gods speaking through other people, Scripture, etc.*

Listening Meetings *Meeting in which participants can tell what they think, feel, fear want, hope for, etc. Each person is received without answering or correction. Only clarifying questions may be asked. No decision is to be made. The purpose is that every person can be truly heard.*

Listen Under *Listen to what there is of God's heart/perspective underneath the words, emotions, dysfunction, personality, etc. Listen to the God-heart that may be hidden at the moment. Listen to the voice of giftedness that threads through the perspective.*

Stand aside *A person allows the decision to go forward, but registers concern about some aspect of it.*

Stand in the way *A person stands in the way of the decision being made.*

Way Forward *The next step that seems wise, good, useful—or God Listening*

Yesness *That inner sense of Yes! that is accompanied by energy and the fruit of the Spirit.*

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Possible Covenant Model of Discernment Decision Making

Biblical. Devotional. Missional. Connectional. The interplay of these commitments, more than doctrine and structure, has given us our bearings. We are less than the ECC if we lose focus on any of these. Their enduring interaction gives rise to our distinctive spirit.¹⁶

Gary Walter

5 Strategic Initiatives of the Evangelical Covenant Church: *Make and Deepen Disciples; Start and Strengthen Churches; Develop Leaders; Love Mercy and Do Justice; Serve Globally*
Covenant Mission and Ministry 2012, brochure

Any model of discernment/decision making used by a Covenant needs to be **Biblical, Devotional, Missional, and Connectional**. It needs to help/enable Covenanters to: **Make and Deepen Disciples, Strengthen Churches, Develop Leaders, Love Mercy and Do Justice, and Serve Globally**. It is my conviction that this model meets these criteria and will greatly help any congregation that genuinely and prayerfully seeks to use it.

- **Biblical**-yes! Look at the book of Acts, as well as many examples in the OT
- **Devotional**-yes! Encourages seeking Christ and his particular will for the congregation
- **Missional**-yes! Encourages putting the focus on Christ and His vision for the church rather than the vision of the members, leaders, or pastors.
- **Connectional**-yes! Recognizes that Christ's kingdom vision for a given area is bigger than just an individual church, and requires connections with other churches in the area and the conference, yet while affirming an individual church's particular calling (unity and diversity in the greater body of Christ).
- **Make and Deepen Disciples**-yes! Jesus ties our effective witness to our love for each other and demonstrated unity. This kind of decision making depends on each individual seeking God's wisdom and insight from the Holy Spirit—learning how to listen to and walk by the Spirit.
- **Strengthen Churches**-yes! Reduces quarreling and division, promotes deeper individual spirituality and the development of a healthy congregational spirituality.
- **Develop Leaders**- yes! Encourages the development of leaders who are seeking to follow Christ, and are encouraging their people to do so also, rather than leaders who are the CEOs/visionaries/guardians for their congregations.
- **Love Mercy and Do Justice**-yes! Allows room for all members of the "body" to contribute and share decision making power as part of the body of Christ, rather than only the "wise," the "charismatic," "those with titles," or the "influential."
- **Serve Globally**-yes! See Missional and Connectional.

Listening Meetings vs. Deciding Meetings, Strategic Discernment vs. Decision Meetings

¹⁶ Gary Walter, "Compass Bearings: Essential Elements," *Covenant Companion*, (August 2010), 5.

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Before the Meeting

Choose the topic for discernment and decision making. This is sometimes called “Naming and Framing”

- Make sure the topics/ issues for discernment are clear to all. What exactly are we trying to discern together. How will we know when we have discerned it?

Choose the kind of meeting. Listening Meeting vs. Deciding Meeting? Strategic Discernment vs. Decision Meeting?

- Make sure the goal of the discernment time is clear to all. Is this meeting to brainstorm and listen to God together, but not necessarily come to a decision? Or is a decision on this topic desirable or necessary at this time.

Gather wisdom from a variety of sources and make it available to the congregation. This includes:

- Biblical passages, theological insights relevant to the topic at hand
- Possible solutions that have been suggested, along with “pros” and “cons”
- Research relevant to the topic (financial, legal, business, practical, etc.)
- Research on the needs of the community, congregation, or on “doors of opportunity”
- Spiritual Gifts/Talents/Strengths/Interests/Passions of congregation members
- Experience/Expertise related to the topic
- Church or congregational tradition
- Church/congregation history that is relevant to the topic, including what had been done regarding this topic/issue to this point, and any past insights from God about the topic.

Prepare Handouts, Power Point, charts, etc. that will be helpful for the meeting, including a summary of the process

Ask the congregation members to individually prepare for the meeting by:

- Reading the “wisdom materials” provided ahead of time.
- Gathering additional relevant “wisdom” materials that they may be aware of and giving them to the leaders for distribution to the congregation if appropriate.
- Seeking to prayerfully discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit as they reflect upon the wisdom materials and how they relate to the topic for discernment.
- Examining their relationships with others in the congregation: Seeking to forgive and let go of/ resolve past hurts/conflicts so that they do not hinder this meeting; seeking to respect each participant; releasing any judgmental feelings.
- Examining their own feelings about the topic to be discerned, seeking to understand them and come to a place of “holy indifference” where they desire to know and obey God’s will in the matter, rather than have their own opinions affirmed or own way adopted.
- Reviewing the process that the congregation will use in its time of discernment.

During the Meeting

Prayer/worship: The goal is to focus on the LORD and submit ourselves to Him and his will.

- Prayers of worship, confession, submission, and petition for insight from the Holy Spirit

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- singing
- reading from the Scriptures

Reviewing the Behavioral Covenant and the Process: The goal is to remind the congregation of what we are doing together, why, and how.

Topic Presentation: The goal is to clearly present relevant information to the congregation that will help it in the discernment process, including:

- A summary of the “wisdom” materials made available prior to the meeting
- A summary of possible solutions, suggested actions, etc. and their “pros” and “cons”
- Any additional information that may be helpful

Listen to the Spirit: Silent Reflective Prayer: The goal is to make space for God to communicate insights to the congregation about his will regarding the topic. This is not a time to read or evaluate the wisdom materials (which should have already been done), but a time to pray. Encourage the congregation to notice ideas, insights, images, feelings, thoughts, concerns, memories, physical sensations, scripture passages, hymns, etc. that come to mind during this prayer time.

Sharing, Discussion and Evaluation

Sharing: The goal is to allow everyone to share (if they wish) what came to mind during the time of listening prayer, recognizing that God can and does speak to any/all members of the body of Christ. This can be done according to “Quaker style,” with open sharing as a person feels led, and prayer and silence between each sharing to consider what was shared, or structured “Ignatian style” by:

Sharing Cons

Prayer

Sharing Pros and Checking Consensus

Prayer

It is helpful to have someone record what is shared by taking notes.

Discussion and Evaluation: The goal is to work together, looking for patterns, to understand how the concerns, insights, experiences, Scripture passages, ideas, needs, solutions, etc. expressed during the sharing time fit together. A variety of brainstorming and group evaluation techniques may be helpful to use.

Affirming: The goal is for the congregation to say about the discernment/decision, it “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). When the congregation has reached a sense of consensus around God’s guidance, the Church Chair/Leader of the Meeting summarizes that consensus, and asks for the affirmation of the congregation on it. Each participant either agrees to honor/support the decision, or states clearly which of their concerns have not yet been addressed. If there still is disagreement or if there are unaddressed concerns, the congregation may then go back into a further time of prayer and discussion, seeking to understand what else God may want to add or change (if anything) about what they have discerned.

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Recording: The decision is written down in the minutes of the meeting and read to the group to make sure that it accurately and clearly states the discernment of the congregation and any action that needs to be taken. The goal is to record the leading of God in and for the congregation, and provide a reference for the future.

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Commitment: The goals are to have a time to thank God for speaking to his people, bringing them to unity, and to commit oneself individually and as part of the congregation to support the decision that has been reached.

After the Meeting

Implementing: Those responsible for implementing the decision seek to develop concrete steps to follow through, recognizing that God wants us to not only be hearers of His word, but doers (Luke :8:12-15; 11:28; James 1:22)!

Continued Listening Prayer: The congregation is encouraged to continue to listen to God about the topic/issue discerned in order to receive affirmation of or further input about the decision.

Continued Evaluation: The congregation and the leadership continue the evaluation process begun in the time of discernment, taking into consideration new information, input, insight, research, problems, new concerns, etc., and assessing if the proposed course of action or decision is accomplishing what was intended. While the discerned decision should not be set aside lightly, it also is not “set in stone,” and there is a recognition that God will continue to guide the congregation regarding the matter after the decision has been reached.

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Recommended Reading

- Barton, Ruth Haley. *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012; also "Becoming a Community that Practices Corporate Leadership Discernment," Transforming Center: Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership, <http://www.transformingcenter.org/> (accessed Dec. 27, 2012);
- Curtiss, Victoria G. *Guidelines for Communal Discernment*. Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church U.S.A., http://www.hudrivpres.org/upload/docs/curtiss_discernment.pdf (accessed August 13, 2013).
- Dougherty, Rose Mary. *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment*. New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1995; also, Dougherty, Rose Mary, Monica Maxon, and Lynne Smith. *The Lived Experience of Group Spiritual Direction*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003.
- Fendall, Lon, Jan Wood and Bruce Bishop. *Practicing Discernment Together—Finding God's Way Forward in Decision Making*. Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2007.
- Isenhower, Valerie K., and Judith A. Todd. *Listen for God's Leading: A Workbook for Corporate Spiritual Discernment*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 2009.
- MacMullen, Ramsay. *Voting about God in Early Church Councils*. New Haven, CT, London, UK: Yale University Press, 2006.
- Morris, Danny E. and Charles M. Olsen. *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church*. Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 2012.
- Oswald, Roy M. *Discerning Your Congregation's Future: A Strategic and Spiritual Approach*. Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 1996.
- Robison, Stephen Daryl. *God at Our Planning Table: Spiritual Discernment as a Viable Alternative for Church Planning and Programming*. D. Min. Thesis. Wesley Theological Seminary, 1989.
- Stevens, Garrie, Pamela Lardear, and Sharon Duger. *Seeking & Doing God's Will: Discernment for the Community of Faith*. Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1998.
- Sheeran, Michael J. *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*. Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1983.
- The Uniting Church in Australia, Queensland Synod. "Meeting Procedures and Consensus Decision Making," <http://wr.victas.uca.org.au/synod-meeting/2011/meeting-procedures-and-consensus-decision-making/> (accessed Aug. 12, 2013); *Manual for Meeting* http://wr.victas.uca.org.au/assets/637/Manual_for_Meetings.pdf (accessed Aug. 12, 2013).

Congregational Decision Making Questionnaire

Adapted from “A National Survey of Ministry Student Spiritual Discernment 2007” by Dennis J Horton, in “Discerning Spiritual Discernment: Assessing Current Approaches for Understanding God’s Will”, *Journal of Youth Ministry* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 30-31.

This survey can be used either by a leadership/staff team to evaluate their congregation’s discernment and decision making practices, or to survey the congregation and assess its understanding and feelings about the current practices.

1. In your congregation who has the authority to make decisions about:

Vision for the Congregation as a Whole

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Vision for Program Areas (children, youth, adult, etc.)

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Scheduling

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Finances

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Programming

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Day-to-day Operations

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Pastoral Staffing

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Church Discipline

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Worship Service Content and Style

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Outreach/Involvement in the Local Community

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Pastoral Care

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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2. When your congregation makes decisions concerning God’s will for them how important are the following in their considerations?

Common sense

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Bible Study and biblical support

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

“Doors of Opportunity”

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Inner peace from the Holy Spirit

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Advice from experts

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Prayers for wisdom to make godly decisions

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Congregational interests and desires

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

The desires and interests of the congregation’s leaders

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Confirming signs from God

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

The strengths, talents, gifts, and abilities of the congregation

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Specific guidance or prophetic answers from God

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

The needs of the congregation

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

The needs of the local community

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Theological arguments

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

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“Business” wisdom

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Consistency with the character/ethics of Jesus

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Denominational traditions, history, advice, concerns, interests, etc.

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

The opinions, rulings, and decisions of denominational leaders or groups

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

3. How often is “business” or practical wisdom used to make congregational decisions?

always often occasionally rarely never

4. How often is guidance from the Holy Spirit used to make congregational decisions?

always often occasionally rarely never

5. How often are decisions made by majority vote?

always often occasionally rarely never

6. How often are decisions made by consensus?

always often occasionally rarely never

7. What processes/activities are used to discern God’s will and make decisions in your congregation?

research on the issue discussion/debate Robert’s Rules of Order

consensus development voting listening prayer sharing of stories

sharing of “leadings” corporate prayer getting advice from an expert

Bible study evaluating the congregation’s giftings, resources, and history

considering the congregation’s needs considering the local community’s needs

discernment meetings surveys requests for congregational input

8. How satisfied are you with the way your church makes decisions?

Very satisfied somewhat satisfied neutral somewhat unsatisfied unsatisfied

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A Discerning Church. *Led by Rev. Merrie Carson*



Many American churches make their congregational decisions based on the sum of individual personal preferences, limited information, and pragmatism. Unfortunately, this promotes disunity, with no assurance that God's will has been discerned and done. This seminar outlines a different way of discernment and decision making that is more faithful to the church's identity as the "body of Christ," and includes the use of three key elements: (1) insights from wisdom sources, (2) guidance from the Holy Spirit through listening prayer and evaluation, and (3) contributions from the entire congregation or group. *Merrie is a member at Midway Community Covenant Church, a spiritual director, and has a D. Min. in Leadership and Spiritual Formation from George Fox Seminary.* merriecarson@comcast.net