

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Spiritual discernment in the church

I've just read a book that moved me more than anything I've read in ages. I believe its message is crucial for all of us who attend or preside over church meetings. The book is *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church*, by Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen (Upper Room Books, 1997). As I read it I kept thinking, over and over, "If we dared to do what these authors suggest, it would transform the church."



Weary from church business as usual

"People are weary," Morris and Olsen find, "from church business as usual, from church gatherings that do not connect with the deeper meanings of their life and faith." "Litanies of committee reports held together by bookend prayers," these authors remind us, "create predictable and sterile meetings," and those aren't what we need.

To connect with the deep meanings, Morris and Olsen believe, we'd have to start relying on the God-given gift of spiritual discernment that's in our midst. Instead of con-



Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God ...

—Romans 12:2

tinuing to depend mainly on procedures and rules, we'd have to start asking deliberately together in our church meetings, "What is God's will for the world and for the church?"

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit ... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ... To one is given ... the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge ... to another the discernment of spirits ...

—1 Corinthians 12:4-11

How could we start?

Starting to use a discernment process would be a radical change for most church groups. Plenty of obstacles that seem insurmountable come to mind immediately. Using a discernment process for a few small church groups is probably the only way in which we'd start if we started at all. We could start small and hope that the process might eventually spread to more groups and larger ones.



Moving so slowly toward using discernment may be necessary, but I wish we could do it more quickly. I fear that when the slow method finally led to the point of using



discernment in major decision-making bodies, so much time would have passed that I'd no longer be around to see it happening. That's strictly a selfish reason, however.

A more important reason is that I'm afraid we'd never get beyond the few small groups with which we started. I suspect that the outcome would be only a surface change at best. More likely, I fear, the consideration of using a discernment process would be turned over to a study committee and die there. That's what seems to happen with many proposals for change in the church.

New marbles on a new board?

As a *Connections* reader recently wrote me, "Many church officials talk like crazy about doing something new and creative, but their definition of that is nothing close to what I define as new or creative. It only has to do with sorting the same old marbles on the marble board. They get very nervous when you or I begin to talk about a whole new game, with a different shaped board, with different marbles or maybe not even using marbles any more."



I'm afraid that changing to a discernment process wouldn't get far unless we did it in a big, bold way, like at Annual Conference sessions, but that would seem like new marbles, a new board, or a new game. In fact, my mere mention of it is probably making some readers say, "She's really lost her marbles now!"

While I was writing this *Connections*, however, another intriguing book about discernment crossed my path. Its approach is rather different from Morris and Olsen's, but its recommendations are very similar. I may pursue this subject further in next month's *Connections*.

Morris, a United Methodist clergyman, is Director of Developing Ministries of The Upper Room, a UMC agency that sponsors numerous programs and publications aimed at promoting spiritual growth. Olsen is Program Director at the Heartland Presbyterian Center in Kansas City. Both authors have worked extensively to integrate spirituality with administration in church groups.



Seeing to the heart of the matter

To discern, Morris and Olsen remind us, means to separate or distinguish, to test in crisis, to distinguish good and evil. Discernment is distinguishing the authentic from the counterfeit. It's seeing beneath the surface. It's seeing to the heart of the matter with spiritual eyes. It's seeing from God's vantage point, with immediate and direct insight.



Discerning is very different from voting and majority rule. "A quick vote," Morris and Olsen point out, "may

shorten a meeting but does not guarantee that everyone will actively support the decision." It's also different from consensus. "Coming to consensus," the authors note, "may be done in a manner that intimidates quiet people into acquiescence. Time constraints may lead busy people to rush to premature judgments." *Robert's Rules of Order* won't necessarily bring good community decisions, either, nor will a debate format. Morris and Olsen tell us that Robert was an army general, and his rules are designed for combat. Debate, Morris and Olsen observe, may work well for verbal and assertive people but not for those whose wisdom comes through reflection, silence, and intuition.



People who step over the edges

Intuitive people who have the spiritual gift of discernment are in our groups, but we're sometimes uncomfortable with them, Morris and Olsen notice. They assure us, however, that "groups that make decisions do well to listen to people who step over the edges of conventional wisdom.

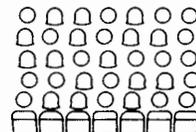


Heretics may be there, but so will prophets. Intuitive people often have difficulty expressing what they know within communities organized by effi-

ciency and in which decision making is dominated by assertive, vocal, or rational people." Intuitive people aren't irrational, but they reach conclusions more by all-at-once insight than step-by-step logic.

Discernment in church meetings

How might we use discernment in a meeting, even a large one?



- First, Morris and Olsen suggest, an opening worship celebration focuses on themes of vision, waiting, leading, and calling.

- Then an agenda-planning team proposes a subject that lends itself to the discernment process.



The team also proposes a specific goal for the process, and proposes boundaries of what will be discussed.

- Next, attenders spend about two hours in small groups. Each group spends the first hour telling their stories and affirming each other's gifts. Then they work at becoming clear on the proposed subject and boundaries, and at developing revisions to suggest if necessary.

Members spend time in silent reflection, asking "What needs to die in us individually and collectively in order for us to discern God's gifts and leading?" They name their personal baggage, passions, and benefits that might be lost or gained from decisions about the proposed subject. Members also try to identify concerns of the larger body that will have to be laid aside in order to respond to God's leading. The small group concludes with prayer.



- Back in the full assembly, revisions proposed by groups are considered. Time for corporate confession and repentance is allowed. Knowledgeable speakers tell what the Bible and Christian history say about the subject. Pertinent hymns are sung.



Firsthand stories of individuals, congregations, or traditions are told.

- The small groups meet again, to discuss what they have heard but not to evaluate it. A few minutes of silence are taken, for listening for the Holy Spirit and maybe for written reflection. Then group members each spend a few minutes considering possible options as to what God's will concerning the subject

may be. The small group's leader reports the group's options to the full assembly's agenda team.

- The agenda team sends a collection of the possible options back to the groups for revision. Group members pray alone, then gather. Each person suggests how each option might be improved. Then all are silent, asking, "Where among these suggested options does the Holy Spirit seem to rest?" The group comes to consensus and chooses a person to report to the assembly through the agenda team.



- A method of closing the process is chosen with the assembly's approval, based on where the discernment process has progressed.

Discernment in Christian tradition



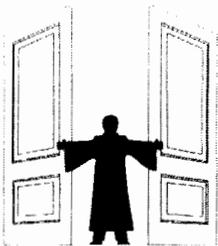
Danny Morris and Charles Olsen find that discernment processes have a long history in Christian tradition.

These authors see many common threads in the ways discernment has appeared in Christian groups and denominations. One common feature is that discernment has costs.

- Discernment involves risk. Its outcome cannot be predicted.
- Discernment takes time.
- Discernment in a group requires being open to the Spirit and to each other.
- Discernment downplays "turfdom." Everyone involved must be committed to seeking God's will, even if it means giving up something.



Using the discernment process in a group can bring great benefits, however.



- Community life is deepened.
- God uses gifted and wise individuals for the good of all.
- The culture of the church moves from win-lose to win-win. The discernment process has no place for blame.

- Discernment leads to involvement with God, with other people, and with the world.

Discernment in the church now

Merely imagining using the discernment process at a United Methodist Annual Conference session or board meeting brings tears of hope to my



eyes, because this process has features I've longed for in church meetings for years. To me, it seems heavenly compared to the way in which many of our meetings now function.

However, my tears are at the same time tears of sadness because I've seen the reactions to other suggestions for much smaller changes in church meetings. "We have no choice," leaders insist.

"The *Discipline* requires us to do what we do." "Our conference rules require it." "We couldn't possibly spend the time this would take. Our people wouldn't put up with it!"



I'm afraid they wouldn't. In my mind I keep hearing a man that I've been in church groups with over the years. He usually comes in the door saying, "Okay, let's get this over with." I'm well aware that plenty of other church members share his attitude even if they aren't as outspoken as he is. They'd come unglued at the mere suggestion of taking time for silent reflection during a meeting.



And yet, as I read Morris and Olsen's book I was especially struck by a quote from Quaker sage Douglas Steere. "A well disciplined business meeting permits a space between members' speaking, when the substance of what has been said can be considered." That sounds wonderful to me. Like many other introverts I'm not comfortable having to make instant responses or decisions. I need some time to think about what has been said, and to consider the pros and cons of various possible responses, before I say anything or vote. However, I doubt that Steere's method would only help introverts. I suspect it would be useful for everyone who wants to discern God's will.

Do we dare to try it?

Could we possibly dare to try a discernment process in the church?

To make the time for it at a meeting like Annual Conference, we'd have to agree at the beginning to



adopt almost everything in the printed preliminary reports in one vote, with no oral presentations or discussion. We'd have to move memorial services and presentation of ordinands and retiring clergy to times outside of the main conference session.



Based on past experience I'm afraid that even those changes are more than we'll ever risk making. I can hardly imagine our making the more radical decision to use a discernment process for discussing some of the crucial issues facing the church today. Still, I'm not giving up hope.

In God there's always hope



I invite you to picture a regional meeting of your denomination, or a meeting of your congregation's board or finance committee, using the discernment process. Picture attenders actively seeking God's will for the church while they are together, instead of merely doing business as usual. Maybe if enough of us can even picture it, we can somehow become God's instruments for helping it to happen.

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Discernment in the church



Have you ever seen a discernment process used in a local-church meeting, with time for silent reflection and personal sharing included? Have you seen it in a large regional meeting? If so, I'd like to hear how it worked. How many people attended? How were attenders divided into small groups? How was routine business handled to make time for the discernment process?

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Jesus looked at [his disciples] and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."

—Matthew 19:26



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and I'm neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative and partly at my own expense, speaking only for myself. *Connections* currently goes to about 12,000 people in all 50 states—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some non-churchgoers.