



Report of the Communal Discernment Task Force

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Preface

This task force has been on a walk—a journey of our own communal discernment. During our walk together we experienced frustrations, tensions, uncertainties, joys, and surprises, and we believe our learning resulted in discoveries that will serve as a model to help others begin to understand communal discernment. As we came together to do our work, our reading, praying, and dialogue surprised us with the gifts of both expected learning and unexpected discovery. It is our hope that this report will capture both experiences, and, perhaps, inspire others to embark on their own communal discernment journey.

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The Walk

We came together at our first meeting with our own individual ideas about communal discernment. Reading had been done in preparation, and there was a “get the job done” attitude in the room. We were a goal-oriented group with a desire for a clear outcome. If one considers the four phases of team building: *forming, storming, norming, and performing*, we moved very quickly from *forming* right into *storming*. (Bruce Tuckman, 1965)

For many of us, communal discernment had been pre-defined as communal *decision-making*. So, naturally, we were led into identifying various alternative methods of making decisions. Blessedly, some members of the task force challenged that set of assumptions, including both assumptions about how the church comes to decisions and assumptions about what the church should be deciding about, and a time of storming began. This was a “tipping point,” a defining moment in the life of the task force, a moment that we would return to again and again if we felt we were falling into the “easy answer” trap. The storming brought us face to face with the complexities of the very questions we had been charged to answer, and led the group into its own period of intense communal discernment, of listening for the Holy Spirit’s movement among us. We had become a microcosm of the whole church and the laboratory for this “experiment.”

For the task force, community-building became of critical importance to our staying committed to doing this work together, even when it became frustrating and confusing. The scripture-based practice of “Dwelling in the Word” was adopted. Each session of the task force’s work opened with a reading of Philippians 1:27; 2:5–11, followed by meditation, deep listening, and conversation. The richness of the different experiences each of us brought to the text deepened our communal understanding and provided groundwork for abiding with Christ in this task. It also provided an “ah-ha! moment”—that our listening, respecting, and sharing different understandings of the same text over a long period of time enriched our individual interpretations with common, communal understanding.

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At the same time that we sought greater definition and focus about communal discernment, we also began to look at the way other communities make decisions; alternative models were reviewed for their relative strengths and weaknesses and their potential viability for use in various expressions of the church. We continued to ask ourselves, “Is a decision-making model going to deepen communal discernment?” Then, another paradigm shift occurred: the task force shifted its goal away from merely finding an alternative model and toward imagining and addressing a change in the culture—away from being outcome-oriented and toward being relationship-focused—and finally, away from having to “fix it” and toward trusting the Holy Spirit to guide us.

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This shift brought us to new learning. By Dwelling in the Word we were reminded that the Holy Spirit reveals God to us through scripture, and that this revelation is an ongoing inspiration. Through our relationship-building in the group, we saw firsthand the restlessness in us as a reflection of what is being felt throughout the larger church—a desire to fix it, and to do so quickly and independently. And, we saw firsthand that God works in conflict, in the very midst of profound differences, and that God would still allow us to experience the first-century description: “See how they love one another.”

Initial Findings

The task force has found joy in this journey together, and we are happy to be able to share with you some of the discoveries we have made:

Communal Discernment is not the same as making decisions.

This kind of discernment is ongoing: it precedes, happens during, and continues to unfold even after a decision is made.

Decision-making can either deepen or damage trust and often contains a dimension of timing.

Knowing when a group is prepared to move to a decision is a matter of discernment in and of itself.

Communal discernment is not the same as individual discernment, and communal discernment is rarely practiced or experienced.

It is more than individually sorting it out and voting in community

It respects the individual gifts of the communal body

It happens in the fabric of the community over time

It involves both formal and informal processes

It is impacted by time boundaries

It frequently brings surprise and discovery

It is a Spirit-led process

Discovering communal discernment may force us back one or two questions from where we imagine we might be. We might have to ask again, in a new way:

What is the question we are discerning?

How do we discern God’s will for this community?

How do we form and deepen Christian community?

In the words of Robert B. Parker’s Boston P.I. character, Spenser, “*Things get real messy when you’re up close.*” Sometimes we need to step back to see what the Holy Spirit has been calling us to see, and gaining some perspective might come only when you look through the eyes of another.

A Cautionary Tale: Common Life without Communal Discernment

In a moment such as this, when the ELCA is deeply challenged by multiple pressures and an unknown future, it is tempting to seek some deeper clarity and a measure of control. One casualty of yielding to this temptation could be the gift of communal discernment. What would our church body look like without it?

What would the church look like without communal discernment?

In a complex organization like the church, we might easily sacrifice Spirit-infused communal discernment in order to develop a well-run

bureaucratic system that can efficiently deliver goods and services. In such a system, we hire professional staff based primarily on educational credentials and proven performance. The hierarchy is so well-organized that input from stakeholders, or church members, is sought only in regard to administrative matters, not usually the mission and vision of the church. Members are able to be affiliated with an organization that meets their religious needs but demands very little of them.

Contemporary business models enable professional church staff to calculate the impact of initiatives through cost/benefit analyses. Such efficiency is often enhanced by reliance on technology. Members need not go to meetings to deliberate corporate decisions, but electronically send in their votes from the privacy of their home or office. The church bureaucracy can closely monitor changes in members' beliefs, opinions and preferences and adjust program delivery accordingly.

In a church without communal discernment, the messiness of human experience is minimized, conflict can be managed by those in power, and there is little or no room for a Spirit who "blows where it wills." The product is more important than the process; predictability takes priority over disruptions of human experience.

Is this the church we are called to be?

Is There a Better Future?

God is calling us toward a better future. When we know things are not working, we struggle with temptations of various kinds. One temptation is to fall into the fear that we cannot fix our problems. When we despair, we might accept that "it's just the way things are." Or we are tempted to look to someone who will claim, "I can fix it." But we know better, as we watch one leader after another fail. God can fix this, but it will involve all of us talking together and hearing God's call in Christian community.

God plants in us all a deep longing to bring our gifts, experiences, and abilities together to build a better church for the sake of the world that God loves. God stirs us up and keeps calling us to reform and improve our shared life in Christ.

God calls to us work on how we discern where God is leading us. God calls us to wonder, "Can we improve the way we listen to one another, engage issues, and make decisions so that trust is deepened and respect grows, even if we should disagree?"

We trust that God is calling us to find ways to improve our communal *discernment* around difficult issues and our communal *deciding* as we seek to be faithful in our time. While we will never find perfection in this broken world and in our own brokenness, God will still be leading us toward new and greater life, even when we think we have failed.

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CHAPTER ONE: Understanding Communal Discernment

Discernment is a key discipline and feature of Christian life. Undertaken individually and communally, it is among the most important spiritual exercises, and, when done effectively and faithfully, it will nurture the church's health and vitality, and lead to fulfillment of vocation and mission in the world.

Yet, the word itself is a loaded word. There is little consensus on common usage and a great deal of confusion about what the word actually means. In brief, then, *discernment*, as we in the task force have been using it, has to do

Discernment has to do with seeking and listening for God's will.

with seeking and listening for God's will, centering on questions such as "What is God up to in this issue?" and "What would God have me/us do?"

Word studies and an exploration of origins can shed some light for us. Discern comes from the Latin, *discernere* – *dis* (apart) + *cernere* (to separate). *Discernment* also has origins in Greek: *diakrisis*, from the root, *krino*, to judge. *Discernment* relates also to: *krisis* (judgment, cf. crisis); *krima* (decision); *kriterion* (means of judgment, cf. criterion); *kritikos* (able to judge, cf. critic, critical, criticism); *synkrino* (to interpret); *krinein* (decide). Informally and loosely, emerging more playfully from these word origins, **discernment** can be viewed as a coming to decision or judgment through crisis and the interpretation and analysis of what is needed for the process of making critical judgments.

When we engage with scripture as "the norm of life and faith," we are making a decision about how we might use and understand the relationship between scripture and discernment. Thus there is a connection in our biblical studies and explorations of, for example, the stories that describe occasions of discernment and decision making in the early church communities. Some of the key New Testament passages that might be helpful for further reflection are:

- **Acts 1:15–26** – Choosing Matthias to replace Judas as an apostle by casting lots. While the decision for Matthias may seem arbitrary and the result of a gamble, the full passage suggests that a discernment process preceded this decision-making mechanism, resulting in two candidates being presented when others may have been considered as well. The followers had devoted themselves to prayer (vs. 14) and the Lord's will was explicitly sought via prayer (vs. 24) to guide the decision for Matthias or Barsabbas. Given the background of such prayerful discernment, the choice of either candidate would have served the emerging church's leadership needs. And as is always the case, the early community lived within any limitations and constraints of decisions made, as we always "have this treasure in earthen vessels."
- **Acts 15:1–35** – The Council at Jerusalem and the decision to extend the Gospel mission to the Gentiles. This passage reveals a discernment and decision-making process undertaken among the earliest of Jesus' followers.
- **Romans 12:1–2** – "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 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—what is good and acceptable and perfect." This passage suggests that discerning God's will emerges from our transformation in Christ and results in our whole-hearted offering of ourselves in Christian life in the power of the Spirit.
- **1 Corinthians 1:18–31** – especially "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'" Lest we rely too fully on our own powers of discernment, this passage suggests that faithful Christian discernment is undertaken in light of the cross and its logic.
- **1 Corinthians 2:1–5** – "When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided (cf. *krinein*) to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." This suggests that the focus for all discernment and decision-making is the crucified Christ.

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Discernment is not, fundamentally, about "me." It is about God, and it is about neighbor.

Communal discernment is, at its best, conversation with God and neighbor, with a lot of time dedicated to listening.

When Christians come together to seek God's will communally, we don't expect to start with a blank slate.

- **1 Corinthians 2:14–16** – *“Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God’s Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (anakrinetai). Those who are spiritual discern (anakrinei) all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else’s scrutiny (anakrinetai). ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ.”*

According to this passage, discernment is faithfully undertaken with the mind of Christ revealed by the power of the Spirit.

Recognizing the Times for Discernment

Discernment is at the heart of what it means to live a life of faith, what it means to be a part of the community of the baptized. It is both an individual and a communal practice.

We are not born with a facility for communal discernment. Rather, we learn it from one another. We experience it, develop it, nourish it, and learn it through practice. We have times when it goes well and times when it does not go well at all. Communal discernment is not a town meeting. It is not democracy by referendum. It is not solo brilliance, and it is not groupthink. Communal discernment takes patience, prayer, forbearance, and non-anxious leadership.

Communal discernment is evidence of “the whole being greater than the sum of the parts.” But those parts must be working parts to make it happen. And those working parts need regular care and maintenance and upgrading. That is the faith journey of the Christian, in prayer and scripture reading and worship and other faith practices, individual and communal. People of faith seek God’s will in all that they do. They pray, meditate, study, read scripture, fast, sing, and share—all as a part of seeking God’s will.

When Christians come together to seek God’s will communally, we don’t expect to start with a blank slate. We are not gathering a jury from among those who know none of the facts and have no opinions on the issues. Rather, we gather interested parties who have a stake in the outcome, who have a deep loyalty to God and neighbor, and who have some understanding and practice in prayer, deep listening, confessing and forgiving, and seeking the greater good.

Discernment is not, fundamentally, about “me.” It is about God, and it is about neighbor. Communal discernment is, at its best, conversation with God and neighbor, with a lot of time dedicated to listening. Discernment is not snap decision making. There are times when decisions need to be made quickly. And there are issues that simply need to be decided, without engaging the spiritual resources of the community.

But there are times in the life of a family, a committee, a congregation, a synod, an institution, the wider church, when an issue cannot and should not be resolved quickly and decisively, with winners and losers. We, as Christians, need to become comfortable in identifying such situations and stating, “This is an issue for which we need a time of discernment.” In a parliamentary system a person can call for a vote with the intention of settling the matter quickly and decisively. Communal discernment is exactly the opposite. It prohibits foreclosing the conversation, a quick settling of the matter, and opens the door to time spent listening for the Holy Spirit.

We have many people in our church who are skilled at conflict resolution, at problem-solving, at cultural competency, at listening, at non-anxious presence, at holding paradox in tension, at dwelling in the word, at group

Some metaphors that have been identified as useful in the process of communal discernment:

Holy Stewing

– a good stew needs time to blend its ingredients. Even though it takes some time and some heat, the ingredients never lose their individual character. For a good stew, you need a good recipe. And, we need to be ready for neighbors who come to us who might not seem to “fit in” to the original recipe for stew.

Listening for God’s Call

One of the most puzzling stories of the Hebrew Bible: 1 Kings 19. Immediately after demonstrating the power of the God of Israel and the near elimination of the official cult of Baal—in what should have been a moment of glory for the God of Israel and the prophet Elijah—Queen Jezebel, acting in conformity with her Phoenician ideals about royal privilege, causes the prophet to flee and hide in a cave. Elijah, who had been so confident in God’s will and readiness to act, now struggled to discern the voice of God.

dynamics, at consensus building, at facilitating groups. We have people who can compile resources, who are fluent in a variety of traditions. We have all these gifts, and many more in this church. Each can play a vital part in communal discernment.

Therefore, it is not practical to attempt to produce a template for communal discernment. That would only set people up for failure. Rather, we can help people to identify when communal discernment might be appropriate and show them ways to set the table so that it is possible.

The Churchwide Assembly is probably the most difficult place in the ELCA to expect or even imagine communal discernment to be effective. Over a thousand people come together for a relatively short time together. They are one in Christ, but they have different backgrounds, different preparation for the assembly, different attitudes about how the Holy Spirit might work, possibly different value systems, and not enough time to build the kind of trust that is needed in the gathered community for effective communal discernment to take place.

A better place to start is locally, in congregations and in synods—in smaller groups where there is already enough trust in one another for those gathered to become vulnerable enough to risk deep listening. Advice from one congregational group who tested this practice was to “Check your emotional baggage at the door. Bring an open mind and a welcoming heart.” We ought to begin wherever this advice can be most easily followed.

Discernment in Our Culture

We have already mentioned that communal discernment does not come naturally for those of us in the 21st-century American culture. We have reduced the discernment process into decision-making in two general categories: individual choices about personal matters and public decisions made through the electoral process.

The rich heritage of the Enlightenment—which enabled societies to consider the independence, dignity, freedom and human rights of each person—has devolved into what is, too often, a hyper-individualism. Such a mentality lifts up the individual at the expense of the whole. We feel entitled to make personal decisions without reference to the common good, such that my decisions are a private matter over which I have complete control and responsibility. As long as I do not directly hurt others, I am free to choose, to live, work, worship, speak, shop, and think however I want. The incorporation of others’ input or concerns in my decision-making process is interpreted as an unwelcome limitation on my individual rights and personal privilege.

Hyper-individualism is rampant in our culture and even in our churches. It has become so much a part of us that we do not notice it. It is just the way we are, even though many in our society, or within the Christian community, do not share the privilege of such decision-making capability. Personal choices about vocation, employment, purchases, and housing, for example, are beyond the reach of many. The range of personal choices available and the freedom to choose among them is limited by social class, economic conditions, race, ethnicity, age, gender, and physical capacities.

Still, the dominant culture holds onto the ideal of individual freedom of choice, even in the church, and is blind to those who cannot enjoy it. And when one part of the body is limited in its ability, the whole body suffers.

Individualistic decision-making is engrained in us as a sign of personal growth and independence, “discernment” is what we call our private processes

Masks of God

Reformation era Christians talked of the masks of God. Exactly where we expect to encounter the numinous, it is not perceptible. A mighty wind, an earthquake, and a raging fire in succession passed before the prophet, but God was not in them. After this cacophony of natural disasters, or “acts of God” as most of our insurance policies call them, came the sound of absolute silence. In this inexplicable and untranslatable negative space, the authors choose to tell us that the Creator of All Things was present.

Organic Metaphors

– ripening in Brazil (the task seems impossible.) When a complicated or controversial subject arises, and it is clear that agreement cannot be reached, the issue is often said to be “not yet ripe.” What is interesting is the assumption that the technology will mature, and that people of good will eventually find ways to work it out. Like the natural growth of a human or an animal, or the ripening of fruits and vegetables in the garden, the process takes time, and with proper nutrients provided.

for making those decisions. Too often we have allowed our Christian faith to be adapted to a privatized understanding of God's presence in our lives. Prayer becomes highly personal, and we experience the Spirit leading us on individual paths which *sometimes* intersect those of others. Such individualism is a distortion of the Gospel itself, which calls us out of self-absorption and into community. The parts of the body of Christ can only function when they are in relationship to one another.

But we have not just relegated our understanding of discernment to personal decision-making: there are public decisions that need to be made and we have public processes for making them. "Discernment" in the public sphere takes the form of watching carefully scripted debates by well-funded candidates engaged in public performances meant to influence our private decision in the voting booth. As a result, there is a level of cynicism and distrust in the process. Americans are increasingly suspicious of attempts by media and government to manipulate them. We revere the public "discernment" process even as we doubt and distrust its integrity.

Research shows that as our social trust continues to decline, so too our interaction with each other decreases. In fact, the two are mutually reinforcing: without interacting with each other, we lose the opportunity to build trust. And so even our "public discernment" becomes individualized, and our capacity for the kind of honest and robust public conversation that is needed for communal discernment becomes severely limited. With an ever-thinning layer of public trust, we put yellow tape around important questions, issues, and sentiments in our public conversation. Taboos around "impertinent questions" limit the honesty and depth of our dialogue.

How then can we really understand criminal justice, for example, without deeply engaging how poverty and racial understandings are active variables in the equation? How can we wrestle with the meaning of leadership in church and society without having difficult conversations about gender? The integrity of discernment is handicapped by the demise in social trust and open and honest dialogue.

Further, by collapsing our collective decision-making (public discernment) into electoral politics, another dynamic is reinforced: a majority "wins," and the losing minority needs to adapt. This "Too bad for you!" attitude toward the minority contributes to alienating large segments of society, who lost perhaps because they did not have access to power and influence. This breeds an increase in our already growing cynicism about our life together which reinforces once again the difficulty in developing social trust. Seeing society divided into winners and losers or insiders and outsiders, our capacity for empathy is eroded. We ignore the reality of the human vulnerability we all share.

With such distortions, it becomes all the more imperative for people dedicated to forming Christian community to recover a means of discernment which values individual conscience, the common good, and what God is doing. Such a reframing of our understanding of discernment runs against social understandings and what our culture tells us is simply "common sense."

A new framework for discernment has to provide portals into seeing both our own self-interest and experience and others' self-interest and experience so that we might more deeply appreciate the diversity, complexity, and nuances of every particular situation. Only then can we seek ways to move forward together that do not alienate large segments of our community. Such a framework for discernment is the vision of a democratic society, and it also

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A new approach to discernment needs to identify, consider, and challenge our points of distrust.

reflects the intentions of the Creator of the human community. As the church comes to understand more deeply how we are to discern as Christ's body where the Spirit is leading us, we can offer to the wider culture new models of public engagement, dialogue and decision making.

CHAPTER TWO: Theology of Communal Discernment

Discernment and Human Sin

Undertaking communal discernment casually, without fully understanding its dynamics, is fraught with danger and the potential for abuse, confusing human whim for God's will. Communal discernment is well-served when we take seriously the effects of human sin, the human capacity for self-delusion, denial, maintaining blind spots, resistance, the need to dominate and control, abusing power and authority, maintaining injustices, pride, greed, and selfishness. Our propensity to rebel against God and to demonize others with whom we disagree can interfere with discernment processes.

Many of the classic understandings of sin speak to sin's interference with faithful discernment of God's will: misplaced trust, missing the mark, being curved in on ourselves. Sin has the power and capacity to distort or even destroy our best efforts at faithful discernment that leads to decisions about our sharing in God's mission in the world.

Discernment is most effective when we can recognize and set aside our own agendas. Even after the most careful, studied discernment, we still see in a mirror dimly (cf. 1 Cor. 13:12) and discernment may/will lead to quite varied decisions/outcomes. Thus, we pray always: "O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." We are called in discernment, decision-making, and living out our faith to "sin boldly, but to believe more boldly still" (attributed to Martin Luther).

Discernment and the Holy Spirit

Discernment is undertaken in the power and through the guidance and leading of the Holy Spirit. It is one of the "means" through which the Spirit guides us into all the truth (John 16:13a) and is best grounded in a robust *pneumatology*, or doctrine of the Holy Spirit, in a Lutheran key. Alas, Lutherans have at many times shied away from considerations of the third person of the Trinity and major aspects of the third article of the creed.

The historical and cultural circumstances out of which Lutheranism was born contribute to a mistrust of the unbridled emotional and enthusiastic expressions which have often been associated with the Spirit's coming. These factors can contribute to a kind of spiritual poverty in our Lutheran communities. Still, we have a great deal to offer about the work of the Holy Spirit, principally that the Holy Spirit works through means, particularly the means of grace, the voice and energy of God operative in and emanating from Word and Sacrament. In fact, the church exists, communally, where the Holy Spirit gathers God's people around that very Word and those sacraments. Discernment is undertaken in close proximity to and with deep engagement in the means of grace in the church as a primary location and focus of the Spirit's activity and energies.

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CHAPTER THREE: Cultivating Practices and Habits

There are various processes that can be employed to cultivate a community that is comfortable with communal discernment. Most congregations will affirm their belief in, and commitment to, the work of the Holy Spirit in their midst. Indeed, most would seek to do God's will in their work. However, a cursory prayer before a vote often suffices in place of deep listening to one another and to God's whisperings in and through the community itself. Therefore, we offer some sample resources and practices which are being used to build familiarity with communal spiritual discernment as an ongoing practice, and help create communities of trust. For some examples of models, see **Appendix C**, "Thriving in Change."

Biblical Engagement

A foundation for effective and faithful communal discernment is deep engagement with Scripture, through which God offers us God's living Word by the power of the Spirit. Through this Word we receive the gifts of wisdom, guidance, and criteria for our discernment. Here are some practices that promise deeper engagement with the scriptures:

Dwelling in the Word:

This simple and straightforward practice involves Bible reading, silence, and conversation with a stranger about what catches our imaginations and triggers our memories. Dwelling enables the open space and time in which to really attend to what the Bible has to say to us in its fullness. See **Appendix A** or visit www.churchinnovations.org/.

Group *Lectio Divina*:

An ancient practice rooted in the Benedictine spiritual tradition, *lectio divina* and its movements—reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation—permit different modes of presence to the scriptural word, allowing attention to its multiple dimensions of meaning. Reading focuses on the objective dimensions of meaning and what the passage actually says. Meditation attends to the more subjective meanings of scripture in terms of what a passage may mean for us in our day. Prayer permits the expression of the Spirit's energies in our praying the prayers that emerge from our scriptural engagement. Contemplation allows us to dwell silently with the Word as a means for God to be directly present to us. For more specific information on how *lectio divina* can serve communal discernment, see **Appendix B**.

African Bible Study:

A variation on a *lectio divina* theme, African Bible Study focuses on scriptural words and phrases in passages that touch us and our life today. This approach offers particular attention to the question of what God would have us do and be in relation to biblical passages. For a guide about how to do African Bible Study, see www.takomaparkpc.org/AfricanBibleStudy.html.

Worship

Worship of almighty God exists as an end in itself, but it also directs us toward God's mission and our vocation in the world. As such, worship can also serve communal discernment. In addition to the regular Sunday assembly, think about incorporating into your communal devotional routine other formats for worship: daily morning, evening, and night prayer; healing liturgies;

*Preparing for discernment:
from Acts 1:12-26*

- *Identify the issue or matter at hand*
- *Consider criteria for judgment*
- *Set apart a time and place for discernment*
- *Identify a leader to facilitate the process*
- *Gather a representative, inclusive group*
- *Devote yourselves to prayer practices*
- *Dwell deeply with scripture*
- *Engage in conversation*
- *Identify your options*
- *Prayerfully examine your hearts*
- *Pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance*
- *Engage a decision-making process*

foot-washing liturgies, perhaps not just on Maundy Thursday; Corporate Confession and Forgiveness. Each liturgy in its own way can nurture the climate for communal discernment.

In worship planning, be attentive to the mood that you cultivate for worship: how chairs are set, how the space is lit, how different types of music will set a different tone. Careful attention to such details can create a grounded, centered, relaxed mood for worship and for communal discernment. Here are further ideas for making the most of the connections between worship and discernment:

Communal Discernment during Corporate Worship:

The movements common during liturgies—Gathering, Word, Meal, Sending—can be vehicles for nurturing communal discernment. When the Spirit Gathers us, we also gather our thoughts concerning that which we need to discern. As the Word is proclaimed, God addresses us and our concerns, providing God’s wisdom for our discernment. The Meal occasions our dwelling with Christ, providing fertile soil in which to allow our discerning wisdom to take root and grow. The Sending can include a time to identify what we have discerned as specific ways forward in mission and ministry. There is more specific information on how worship can serve communal discernment later in this chapter.

Contemplative Eucharist:

A Contemplative Eucharist—especially appropriate for retreats and quiet days—differs from a usual liturgy of Holy Communion in it allows time and space to really soak in the experience of God in the liturgy. For example, a Contemplative Eucharist might occur over the course of several hours, rather than a single hour. During this time, extended silences can be observed after each reading. A more leisurely pace also allows time for conversation among worshipers, for example, at the Gathering, in place of a traditional monologue sermon, and at the Sending. Extended silence to dwell with God’s Word and time for conversation opens up space for effective communal discernment. For an example of an order of service for a Contemplative Eucharist, see **Appendix D**.

Prayer

No effective and faithful communal discernment can be undertaken without a spirit of prayerfulness. Prayer focuses our attention on God and away from ourselves. Prayer invites the Holy Spirit’s leading and guiding. Prayer seeks God’s will and the mind of Christ. Here are simple ideas for prayer practices that build on both individual prayer routines and communal worship, which can serve communal discernment:

Prayer Partners and Intercessory Prayer Groups:

In addition to individual prayer disciplines and corporate worship, the community of the church can build on its prayer life by establishing partnerships and groups within the community to convene to pray specifically for the matters that are the focus for communal discernment.

Rotations of Intercessions and Prayer Calendars:

The church can publish the persons and matters which it wants to uphold in prayer, offering these according to calendars. Such listings reinforce common prayer, in that partnerships and prayer groups would be focusing on the same

Biblical Engagement:

Dwelling in the Word

enables the open space and time in which to really attend to what the Bible has to say to us in its fullness.

Lectio Divina

and its movements—reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation—permit different modes of presence to the scriptural word, allowing attention to its multiple dimensions of meaning.

African Bible Study

offers particular attention to the question of what God would have us do and be in relation to biblical passages.

Gathering, Word, Meal, Sending — can be vehicles for nurturing communal discernment.

Worship of almighty God exists as an end in itself, but it also directs us toward God’s mission and our vocation in the world. As such, Worship can also serve communal discernment.

matters. For examples of such prayer calendars, see www.ELCA.org/What-We-Believe/Prayer-Center.aspx.

Prayer Walking and the Labyrinth:

Prayer need not be confined to sitting or kneeling. Try walking through the neighborhood of your congregation or the community context where your ministry is located. Pay attention to what you see. Notice the intercessory prayers that may emerge on your walk, prayers that may be fodder for communal discernment, setting agendas for mission and ministry. Walking the labyrinth is another kinetic spiritual discipline that may, in its leisure, open up space to nurture communal discernment. For guidance on walking the labyrinth, see <http://tinyurl.com/LWT-Conversation-Tools>.

No effective and faithful communal discernment can be undertaken without a spirit of prayerfulness.

Prayer and Physical Activity:

Physical activity can also be seen as a spiritual discipline. A well-exercised, relaxed, attuned body contributes to effective communal discernment. Physical activity as a group can help build a community of trust. For further information on how prayer can be incorporated into physical activity, see <http://tinyurl.com/Stretch-and-Pray>.

Community of the church can build on its prayer life by establishing partnerships and groups within the community.

Centering Prayer and Contemplation:

Centering Prayer is a simple method that nurtures over the long run a contemplative presence that can serve as fertile ground for undertaking communal discernment. For further information on Centering Prayer that can nurture a contemplative presence, see <http://www.centeringprayer.com/>.

Walking the labyrinth is another kinetic spiritual discipline.

Time Apart and Being Still

Effective communal discernment requires times apart from regular, busy routine to make space for seeing the bigger picture so that we are not lost in the details before us. Likewise, times for being still, refraining from frantic activity, also serve communal discernment. Here are perspectives and practices that can help us grow in stillness and in just being:

How to occupy yourself in times of silent contemplation, of quiet prayer:

Silence and Holy Listening and Holy Daydreaming:

We live in noisy cities and a noisy culture, constantly plugged in to news, information, music and other sounds and images through many and various media. But we need rest from over-stimulation. We need to make opportunities to rest in comparative quiet.

Focus on your breathing

Time spent in silence is counter-cultural in our day, but it is crucial for effective communal discernment. Silence enables deep and sacred listening, again, a foundation for discernment. Likewise, silence opens up space for what might be called holy daydreaming, occasions apart from “to do” lists, time to just be. In such wide open spaces, we can dream dreams and see visions, means through which God in the Spirit draws us to that which God would have us be and do, all central to communal discernment. Communal silence is quite foreign to most of our experience. Look for opportunities to be in silence together, so that the needed times of silence in communal discernment grow more customary.

...continuously offer a simple prayer:

“Lord, have mercy.”

“Your will be done.”

“Come, Lord Jesus.”

“Come, Holy Spirit.”

The following points provide some suggestions for how to occupy yourself during times of silent contemplation, of quiet prayer. Don’t think of this as a ‘to do list’—rather, feel free to come and go with these themes as you feel drawn:

...apparent distractions may actually be important cues leading you to what you need to pray for

...how might you wish God would respond to you and your needs?

- Focus on your breathing – breathe more deeply and slowly; offer a prayer while you breathe in and breathe out, thinking of your breath as coming from the very breath of God...
- Focus on a word special to you as a kind of mantra to be gently repeated over and over again to still your mind. Or continuously offer a simple prayer: “Lord, have mercy.” “Your will be done, O God.” “Come, Lord Jesus.” “Come, Holy Spirit.” And so on...
- Pay attention to what and where and to whom your busy mind is drawn – your apparent distractions may actually be important cues leading you to what you need to pray for...
- Notice the noises you hear outside – do these noises, like the wailing of a siren, or the sounds of a jet plane, draw you to prayer, to praying for those in crisis or in transit, for example?
- Consider your thoughts and feelings, your hopes, your memories, whatever it is you bring to this time and how you might wish God would respond to you and your needs.
- Attend to these basic questions: What do you think or feel you need to confess today? For what blessings in life are you thankful? What are your concerns for tomorrow? What brings you joy, gladness, a sense of appreciation?
- And/or simply relax and enjoy the comparative quiet of this time, freely letting the silence wash over you as a gift in our busy and noisy world. Rejoice that you can enjoy a time of silence together as a community.

Retreats and Quiet Days:

The tradition of going away on retreat and setting apart whole days as quiet days can serve communal discernment by breaking busy routine and making space for seeing the big picture concerning matters before us.

Conversation

Communal discernment is best practiced in a spirit of open listening rather than contentious debate. Good conversation can be profoundly sacred and a means through which the Spirit brings us together in the bonds of affection. Within these bonds, we may receive greater clarity concerning our discernment. Here are ideas about ways through which we can enhance our conversational life together:

Group Spiritual Guidance:

Like individual spiritual direction, group spiritual guidance is a structured format led by a trained guide that can be the context for small groups in Christian communities to undertake communal discernment. For further information on group spiritual guidance, see <http://tinyurl.com/What-is-Spiritual-Direction>.

Mutual Conversation and Consolation:

In the Smalcald Articles, Martin Luther listed mutual conversation and consolation among the means of grace, alongside preaching, baptism, Eucharist and confession and forgiveness, making the point that faith-oriented conversation in Christian community is a powerful way God is present to us. Some of the simplest practices, like good listening when participants feel heard, are the most profound. Don't overlook the power of the ordinary in the pursuit of exotic spiritual disciplines. There are great spiritual gifts before us, hidden

Attend to these basic questions:

What do you think or feel you need to confess today?

For what blessings in life are you thankful?

What are your concerns for tomorrow?

What brings you joy, gladness, a sense of appreciation?

...freely let the silence wash over you as a gift in our busy and noisy world...

Some of the simplest practices, like good conversation when participants feel heard, are the most profound.

Don't overlook the power of the ordinary.

in plain sight, like mutual conversation and consolation among brothers and sisters in Christ.

Communal Meals:

Don't forget about the power of a good church potluck as a vehicle to deepen community bonds of affection, thus serving to cultivate positive group dynamics necessary for effective communal discernment. Casual conversation over dinner can go a long way in nurturing a sense of genuine community.

Never underestimate "The Power of the Potluck."

Seeing God in our Days and Gifts

Communal discernment is best practiced with a growing awareness of the ways in which God is already active in our days and routines. Likewise, communal discernment is aided by having an accurate awareness of our spiritual gifts individually and communally. Here are some suggested practices that can help us grow in awareness of how God is present in our days and according to our gifts:

Learning from St. Ignatius:

St. Ignatius of Loyola and the Ignatian spiritual tradition which he founded provide significant, practical and concrete resources for making a careful examination of our days to discern the hand of God in our experiences. For further information on the Examen in the Ignatian spiritual tradition, see www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/

Spiritual Gifts Inventories:

God blesses us individually and in communities with manifold gifts. Sometimes we need assistance in discerning what those gifts are. For further information on spiritual gifts, inventories, and assessment tools, see <http://tinyurl.com/Finding-Your-Spiritual-Gifts>

Asset Mapping:

In an age characterized by a spirit of scarcity, we are called to remember that God blesses us with abundance, with gifts and assets to engage in God's mission. Asset mapping for use by congregations and ministries is a technique that helps us focus on God's abundant gifts for mission, thus aiding our communal discernment. For further information on asset mapping, see "[Some Basic Asset Mapping Instructions](#)."

Discernment Observer Process:

When engaging in communal discernment, it is important to claim occasions to step back from the process to take stock of how you as a community are doing. Participants can take turns serving as observers of your communal discernment process. Such observers can offer reflections (more descriptive than analytical and critical) on the process according to the following criteria (distilled from Acts 1:12–26):

- How effectively have we identified the issue or matter at hand for discernment?
- Have we adequately considered and identified the criteria for judgment?
- Have we set apart enough time and a place for discernment?
- Have we identified an effective leader or team of leaders to facilitate the process?

- To what extent have we gathered a representative and inclusive group?
- Have we deeply devoted ourselves to prayer practices?
- To what extent are we dwelling deeply with scripture?
- How are our conversations going?
- Have we yet identified the options before us?
- Have we prayerfully examined our hearts?
- Did we pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance?
- What kind of decision-making process did we or are we going to use?

Beyond assessing these “mechanics” of communal discernment, an observer may also wish to reflect on the qualitative, less tangible dimensions of the process using these marks and values:

Relationship with God

- Seeks God's will, the values of God's reign, and the mind of Christ
- Listens for God's call
- Pursues faithfulness
- Dwells with God's Word
- Occurs close to the means of grace
- Responds to the Holy Spirit's promptings
- Seeks the Spirit's guiding us into all truth
- Focuses on charisms, gifts of the Spirit
- Occurs in a spirit of thanksgiving, confident in God's grace
- Makes for good stewardship of all of God's gifts

Community of Trust

- Practices attentive, deep, and holy listening (obedience)
- Offers non-anxious, courageous presence
- Strives for humble openness and willing engagement
- Cultivates wonder and awe
- Honors difference
- Cherishes the dignity of others
- Builds communities of trust
- Builds up the body of Christ
- Invites gentle wrestling with issues
- Focuses on the journey
- Seeks to balance closure with open-endedness
- Tolerates ambiguity
- At its best, does not result in winners and losers
- Seeks clarity, wisdom, and understanding
- Embodies a willingness to take a leap of faith
- Comes naturally, organically to a conclusion
- Affirms “ubuntu,” I am because we are
- Honors our corporate, embodied interdependence and shared life
- Continues even after decisions are made
- Offers prophetic challenge to dominant societal narratives
- Faithfully disrupts business as usual, questioning the question
- Breaks us out of our usual patterns of seeing the world
- Nurtures fertile ground for decision-making

Communication Habits

- Empowers freedom to speak fully
- Speaks truth in love

- Genuinely lets others be heard
- Encourages storytelling
- Brackets egos and personal agendas
- Nurtures holy stewing and ripening
- Regularly checks in to assess where we are
- Embodies patient waiting

With these tools, we hope that the habits and practices of communal discernment will become part of the internal processes of your individual congregational members as well as small groups and leadership teams.

CHAPTER FOUR:

The Practice of Communal Discernment in the ELCA

The primary question the ELCA is considering through the work of the LIFT Task Force is, “*What is God calling the ELCA to be and do in the future?*” When it comes to decision-making and communal spiritual discernment, ***who we are in Christ*** leads to how we discern and decide. We are called to be a part of God’s mission in the world. Put in other words: the community of the body of Christ is more important than the outcome of the decision-making; the journey is as important as the destination; it is better to be caught being *Christian* than being *right*. Discerning together what God is doing in our shared life and discerning God’s preferred and promised future for our church is one way of trying to understand God. We believe that discernment processes seek truth while deepening community.

It is important to recognize that the historical methods of decision-making have served us well in many circumstances and that we should appreciate those efforts. But congregations and indeed the denomination have habits of decision-making that don’t always make space or time for prayer, discernment, and deep listening, so they do not have the chance to try to understand God’s will. However, as methods have evolved, new insights have led to new approaches. We believe this is one of those moments because the issues have become more volatile and previous methods do not adequately integrate our faith and our emotions.

Ideally, the culture for decision-making would be one which is open to all, which reflects tradition, contemporary context, and the sources of Lutheran identity. If the discernment is deep, wide, and sincere, the formal ratification of decisions will be more likely to build up the body of Christ.

This task force feels it ought to be the church’s ongoing task to **cultivate a culture of discernment** in our church in all its expressions. Such a culture develops habits and practices such as Dwelling in the Word, *lectio divina*, and other personal and communal prayer and meditation processes. Such a culture also develops the habit of deep listening to the other with respect and love. Deep listening (to God and to the other) cultivates dispositions and attitudes that reveal the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5) as well as creating comfort in embracing silence and letting go of time sensitivity.

Here are some questions that we have reflected upon, which are illustrative of the discernment process:

Does the cultivation of such habits disregard reason and rationality? No. Indeed, deep dwelling in the Word requires a critical interpretation of scripture and critical and intentional listening to one another. Reason completes meditation, discernment completes understanding.

*When it comes to decision-making and communal spiritual discernment, **who we are in Christ** leads to how we discern and decide.*

The church’s ongoing task is to cultivate a culture of discernment.

Reason completes meditation, discernment completes understanding.

Is voting or some other decision-making method appropriate? Yes, when specifically called for through the church's processes and policies.

Will we ripen at different paces? Yes. And then it is even more important to have communal discernment practices learned and functioning as habits, so that the community itself articulates that they are either ready or not yet ready to decide a matter by voting. If discernment goes deep, formal decision is the simple ratification of what has been discerned.

How will we know when we are ready and ripe for a vote? We will know when we have prayed and listened deeply long enough to know that everyone is ready.

What is the status of communal discernment practices in the various expressions of the ELCA? This task force asked for and recorded stories of congregations, parishes, and clusters engaged in communal spiritual discernment at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly, but they were few, and not many involved engagement with scriptures, traditions, and practices of the church. Several who told stories likened spiritual discernment to a moment when things fell into place serendipitously, "as if by magic." Almost all those who were interviewed only had examples of discernment as an individual rather than a communal and sustained practice.

At the churchwide level, the ELCA Church Council and Conference of Bishops have been introduced to and have experienced some practices of communal discernment such as Dwelling in the Word, prayer before voting, small group Bible study, accountability documents, small group conversation and sharing, process observation, and communication and discernment exercises from www.TheWorldCafe.com. The task force believes there is a hunger for sustained discernment practices throughout the church.

Synodical activities may connect with and support communal discernment, such as participation in the Book of Faith initiative, which may help people encounter scripture in their search for discerning and understanding God truly; the "Bound Conscience" conversation following the 2009 Churchwide Assembly, which may help us listen better and more deeply to one another; and the LIFT Task Force/ecology study that will create a wider understanding of the entire denomination and its various inter-relationships.

Faithful innovations recognize the complexity of the contemporary church body. As our structural relationships are fragile, experiments must serve to advance the process of discernment while strengthening our commitment to serve Christ and one another. Since risk is inherent in change, implementation of new methods must begin with trust-building and mutual respect. To that end, experimentation must happen at all levels of the church (congregation councils, synod councils, churchwide committees and council) as well as at the Churchwide Assembly.

It is our hope to learn from other church bodies how to more effectively participate in the processes of communal discernment as we are creating a culture that gives space and time to the work of understanding God's will. While there seems to be no magical solution or panacea out there, we believe we can learn certain things from the way resolution language is changing, from the Consensus Model used by the World Council of Churches, and even by tweaking *Robert's Rules of Order*, as other church bodies have done. The task force would also like to continue learning how our full communion partners and global partners allow time and space for discernment and how other Christian traditions seek to understand God as they deliberate the issues facing them.

If discernment goes deep, formal decision is the simple ratification of what has been discerned.

Discernment may be impeded by decision-making methods that make trust building difficult and may reduce the clarity of the common vision by placing expediency before thorough understanding and agreement. There are some current practices that we believe could be eliminated or changed and some new methods that we think would be more consistent with discernment objectives.

Discernment may be impeded by decision-making methods that make trust building difficult.

The thrust of these recommendations is to enable the process of deliberation to be (a) supportive of those who have not yet arrived at a decision, (b) fair in representing multiple perspectives, and (c) open to the influence of the Holy Spirit. These recommendations are identified in **Appendix G**.

These recommendations will be made in a timely fashion to the appropriate ELCA expressions.

Wider Communal Dimensions of Discernment

The common practice of individual discernment can also be taken up communally. Communal discernment respects the charisms, the gifts, of individual members of the body. Discernment is for all of God's people and all groupings and sub-groupings in Christian community (not just those, for example, considering public, rostered ministry.) All expressions of Christian community should make room for and provide occasion and processes for discernment among all of God's people. Specifically in the ELCA, it is the intention of the Communal Discernment Task Force that practices of discernment would be leaven in the whole loaf that is our church in all of its expressions: congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization. Discernment at its best is done interdependently among the expressions of our church, nurturing our interdependent ecclesiology, emerging from hoped for ever growing and deepening levels of trust among the expressions of the church.

Communal discernment in the ELCA is not limited to the constituent expressions of our church. Our interdependence extends beyond our structures to member churches of The Lutheran World Federation and to our full communion and other ecumenical partners. Moreover, interfaith dialog is crucial for discernment practices in our current mission and global, multicultural context. Furthermore, theological reflection undertaken in the light of human experience, with knowledge of human and other sciences, philosophy, and other academic disciplines enriches the practice of discernment. In short, full and rich discernment involves a multiplicity of conversation partners. Faithful discernment practice embraces the African concept of *ubuntu*, that we have no existence apart from others. And in a global village, the "other" extends to the far reaches of the planet.

*Faithful discernment practice embraces the African concept of **ubuntu**, that we have no existence apart from others.*

... In a global village, the "other" extends to the far reaches of the planet.

Building a culture for communal discernment takes real time and energy. It is not yet something Christians automatically expect to do together. If and when communal discernment happens, we are not attuned enough yet to notice it. Recently 10 perceptive believers of truly good will watched eight individuals telling stories of both personal and congregational spiritual transformation. At the end, they could repeat the personal transformative moments they had heard but hadn't even noticed there were any stories of congregational, communal spiritual growth. As long as our vision of spirituality and discernment appears in personal terms, we will miss seeing its effects on our communities of faith. But with time, good practices and habits, and the action of the Holy Spirit, a culture of communal discernment can be created and nurtured.

Building a culture for communal discernment takes real time and energy.

Walking into a Better Future

Imagine a member of Trinity Lutheran choir's tenor section mowing his lawn on a Saturday afternoon. His neighbor, Ann, a single mom living with her children and her gay brother and his partner, leans over the fence and calls to him. He stops mowing and goes to her, listening carefully to her problem, and then texts two friends. They arrive to help Ann make an emergency repair to the bathroom, providing support and respect for the dignity of this unconventional family.

The family invites the neighbor and his family and the two friends to their house for a barbeque on the deck, and even though those two friends have always opposed gay marriage, they come and eat together. The smell of the grill and the sound of laughter and jazz wafts out over the neighborhood.

Imagine a synod assembly considering a change to an existing practice regarding administration of a sacrament. The room seems divided among at least three options. The large assembly "dwells" in a Bible story, and each person listens to a stranger speaking freely about where their imagination was caught by the text, or about a question they'd like to ask a Bible scholar. Some of these pieces of conversation are reported back to the large group, allowing the time of dwelling to shape the next part of the work.

Then the large group breaks into table groups of strangers who walk through a familiar ritual, answering the question "What might God be up to in this issue for us?" They act and speak as though they expect the Holy Spirit to show up and be a part of the conversation. They bring cultural values and their own **communal** and **personal** experience into brainstorming possible answers to the question. They take time to converse deeply, letting go of their agenda anxiety and simply relax with one another in the exchange of ideas and questions. Their posture is engaged but comfortable. Their tone is respectful. Their actions demonstrate concern not only for their tablemates but also for those not present in the conversation. When the conversation time is coming to a close, a skillful table leader gathers the key themes that have emerged. The table group thanks God for being there, for leading them.

The large group returns to plenary session and themes are shared, and a remarkable number of them are similar. There is (not yet) a single direction discernible, but some unity has come out of the previously diverse perspectives. Someone proposes that the assembly is not yet ready to decide a direction, but all celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst and rejoice that they are one in this Spirit. Plans are made to continue discernment conversation on the emerging themes, so that, at a later meeting, the group might be able to share one clear vision of the direction toward which God is calling them.

Imagine a congregation council meeting to resolve a tough budget shortfall. Many council members thought the purpose of a council was to make businesslike decisions for the good of the church and to have budget questions answered before the annual meeting. Yet this year, there is not enough money or information to meet that goal or that deadline.

Instead of a perfunctory prayer before the meeting, the whole council listens to the lectionary text for that week, hearing the story and talking about it together. Then the chair asks, "What is God up to in this financial dilemma for us?" Silence unfolds (and is welcomed). One member recalls a similar experience on a different issue which was beautifully resolved by employing prayer and deep listening to those most affected by the decision. It was considered by many in the congregation a true moment of spiritual discernment for that congregation.

Individual discernment is taken up communally. And communal discernment respects the charisms (the gifts) of individual members of the body.

It is our hope to learn from other church bodies how to more effectively participate in the processes of communal discernment as we are creating a culture that gives space and time to the work of understanding God's will.

Invitations are made to persons who will be affected by the lack of funds, and those persons are listened to, their comments made part of the record, and their worth appreciated. When the council meets again, those comments and subsequent learnings are brought into the conversation, and the council members take turns saying the difficult things they know must be said, knowing their fellow members will have a hard time with them, and yet, will accept them graciously.

Some keep testing the possible decision alongside the mission of the congregation, which they all know well. Prayer, silence, more speaking, and prayer ensue, and finally a vote. The council determines to share the process, the journey, and the outcome with the congregation immediately, even though it is now past the budget deadline. The congregation responds with words of gratitude for the council's living out the Gospel as it discerned God's continued call to the congregation. They celebrate the council's faithful and effective work.

Imagine a Churchwide Assembly considering some aspect of consecrating persons called into service in the church. Among the hundreds of participants are candidates who seek this consecration. They are spread out into a great many of the tables in the room. Each table has someone who can lead different styles of discernment conversation. Participants to whom these methods are new still contribute, and even people who are very familiar treat their fellow discerners with humility. No one makes fun of the process as weird or spooky, although some of the press covering the event report it so.

When the group reconvenes in plenary, there is a sense in the room that something holy has happened, and yet there are many who are not yet convinced about the emerging direction the assembly might take. They are allowed to vote in such a way as to say, "I disagree but will not stand in the way of passage," or "I agree but urge a delay in implementation."

The assembly rejoices that it has been able to move forward and yet honor those who disagree, and they celebrate the work that has happened and the Spirit that has enabled it. The press cover the story including both (to them) the oddness of the process and the joy of the oneness, even in the remaining difference. As they interview a key leader, she tells them that this communal spiritual discernment is part of church life in every expression of the church, and that it is a mark of our identity as Christians, no matter the level of tension in the issue or division over possible outcomes. It is the way we are who we are as the body of Christ.

Discernment and the Stewardship of Mission

Communal discernment will help us in the church to become better stewards of our decision-making in assemblies and other arenas where decisions are made concerning our participation in God's mission in the world. There is no guarantee that our decisions will be better in any absolute sense, but a culture of communal discernment will encourage us to take better care of the community making the decisions.

Communal discernment may make us better stewards of time in that faithful discernment processes, while taking time, may lead to the kinds of decisions that may save time in the long term.

Communal discernment may help us be better stewards of our future. That is, faithful discernment processes may open us more fully to God's intended future and to live into that future more courageously. We are likewise called to

The assembly rejoices that it has been able to move forward and yet honor those who disagree, and they celebrate the work that has happened and the Spirit that has enabled it.

When it is all said and done, effective and faithful communal discernment will nurture our stewardship of the Gospel and our calling to live it and proclaim it to the world in mission.

Discernment helps us, in the power of the Spirit, to know our vocation in the world.

*In the words of Frederick Buechner in **Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC**: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."*

be good stewards of communication in all its dimensions. Effective, full, forthright, and loving communication makes for good and faithful discernment.

Discernment helps us, in the power of the Spirit, to know our vocation in the world. When all is said and done, effective and faithful communal discernment will nurture our stewardship of the Gospel and our calling to live it and proclaim it to the world in mission.

Appendix A: Dwelling in the Word

Here are the steps for 20 minutes of Dwelling in the Word:

1. Pray for the presence of the Holy Spirit in your meeting that day.
2. Start with Philippians 1:27, 2:5–11, knowing that at some point, you may want to select your own passage, a story that is related to the story of your group’s work. But start with Philippians 1:27, 2:5–11. It is a good piece for discernment together. Have Bibles available at every meeting so that the story can be read by different people each time you meet. Or make copies of the passage for everyone.
3. Begin your meeting with one person reading this passage aloud to the group. Then allow some silence to unfold as people let the words have their impact.
4. Next, instruct folks in this way:
Find a person in the group you know least well (we call this person a “reasonably friendly looking stranger”).
Listen to that person as he or she tells you what they heard in the passage. They may mention something they’d never heard before, something odd or something comforting, or something about which they’d like to ask a Bible scholar.
Listen well, because your job will be to report to the rest of the group what your partner has said, not what you yourself said.
Some people even take notes to help them focus and remember.
5. Then, turn folks loose with their partners for 6–10 minutes. Notice how they are paying attention. When you draw them back together to report what they have heard, ask for what they learned from their partners.

Now, wrestle together as a group with what God might be up to in the passage for your group on that day.

Philippians 1:27, 2:5–11

1:27

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.

2:5–11

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Appendix B: *Lectio Divina* as a Communal Discernment Exercise

The following straightforward method of devotionally engaging with scriptural texts is intended to take us deeper into God's Word, carried on the winds of the Holy Spirit speaking in the Word, that we in the church may discern more intentionally what God may be calling us to do. Each of the following movements, taking place over the course of a 60 to 90 minute session, takes us ever more deeply into the very presence of God known in the gift of the living Word.

Movement One: Preparation

As the group gathers, engage in conversation (for about fifteen to twenty minutes) about what is on the hearts and minds of participants, ranging from personal to ecclesial and world events, especially that which we would have God address during this hour. With communal discernment in mind, this preparatory time might also be spent identifying the issues, pros and cons, complexities, nuances, and implications of the matters at hand. Once all is, as it were, on the conversational table, spend some time in prayer, silently and/or aloud, seeking the Spirit's guidance toward giving a living and clarifying word for us at this time.

Movement Two: Reading

Have a volunteer read a chosen scriptural passage aloud slowly and deliberately. This passage will have been chosen prior to this session. As the passage is read, and during a period of 5-minute silence following, pay close attention to what the passage actually says. What are the key words and ideas and points of the passage, especially as they pertain to the matters for discernment? This is the time for studied examination of the passage, discerning the more objective dimensions of its meanings. After this silent consideration, members of the group, as they are moved, name aloud what they think are the most important points of the reading pertaining to what they are discerning (5–10 minutes).

Movement Three: Meditation

Read the biblical text a second time aloud. In the 5 minutes of silence following this reading, meditate on what the passage might mean for us now in our own day, focusing especially on insights that offer wisdom for discernment. While the first reading sought the text's objective meaning, now we turn to more subjective, contemporary, and contextual meanings based on and emerging from the first reading and reflections on it. After the silent meditation, have a conversation (for about 20 minutes) in which participants share reflections, especially attempting to discern what the Spirit may be saying to us, as the Spirit guides us today into all truth through engagement with God's Word.

Movement Four: Prayer

Read the passage a third time aloud. In the 5-minute silent period following this reading, pray the prayers that well up in you, especially the ones that emerge from the previous silent periods and conversations. After time for silent prayer, members of the group may pray petitions and thanksgivings aloud as they are moved. Pay attention to what the Spirit may be moving you to pray in response to the discernment matters at hand.

Movement Five: Contemplation

Read the passage a fourth and final time aloud. During this last 5-minute silent time, simply dwell with each other in God's presence in the power of the Spirit as that presence has been made known in the Word. This is a time to claim the leisure to really let the living Word soak in you for ongoing formation, reformation, and transformation in Christ, and to settle into any emerging clarity for discernment. Contemplative stillness nurtures a quality of presence appropriate for further discernment and possible decision-making.

Movement Six: Sending for Mission

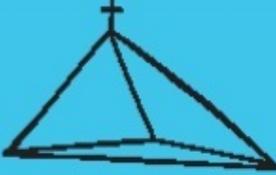
After the period of silent contemplation, have a conversation for 15 to 30 minutes about what our insights in this whole experience may mean for our discernment of our mission in the world, what God would have us do. Particularly, is there any emerging clarity about next steps in discernment and insights about decision-making? Is there an emerging consensus about the matters at hand? What living word will we take with us into the world? What word will we be and do in our ministry in daily life and as an expression of the church's mission in the world? This movement may set the stage for decision-making.

Appendix C: Thriving in Change
A Communal Discernment Model



THRIVING IN CHANGE

QUICK START TO A DEEPER DIVE

1. Pray for the Holy Spirit's presence.
2. Dwelling in the Word and prayer:
Philippians 1:27, 2:5-11
 
3. Dyads discuss three questions.
When has God moved in our midst in the past?
Where do we see God moving now? What gives us hope?
Who is God in these days? What Bible story do we seem to be living in?
 
4. Review ground rules for the process .
 
5. Float a conversation that may move to spiritual discernment.
Ask and reflect on how God might be moving around your church's "Question for Discernment" for your church.
 
6. Returning to the Word and prayer.
Philippians 1:27, 2:5-11



CHURCH INNOVATIONS
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Appendix D: Communal Discernment and Worship

Worship is a great opportunity for the whole assembly of God's people to engage in communal discernment. Each and every liturgy is brimming to overflowing with God's voice from beginning to end, offering wisdom for our ministry and mission. When in worship we thoughtfully attend to the question of what God would have us be and do, we may prayerfully discover ways forward in our life together, listening attentively to God in Christ made known to us in Word and Sacrament.

If time and space for communal discernment is the desired outcome, be sure that no element of worship pushes one side or another of the question at hand but instead undergirds the oneness of the body and the value of its many members. Here's how the basic liturgy can nurture a spirit of communal discernment:

Gathering

The Holy Spirit calls us together as the people of God.

This movement in worship invites us to gather our thoughts, feelings, and concerns about events and circumstances that may be matters for communal discernment. Instead of program announcements at the beginning of the service, a worship leader may invite members of the assembly to consider and name concerns aloud. In some settings, for example, worship when on retreat, the assembly may engage in conversation which identifies concerns for discernment. Such gathering of thoughts, feelings, and concerns then sets the stage for other features of this movement of worship, namely, Confession and Forgiveness, Thanksgiving for Baptism, Gathering Songs, and the Greeting and Prayer of the Day.

Word

God speaks to us in scripture reading, preaching, song, and prayer.

The readings, psalm, and Gospel for the day contain the living Word of God for us which addresses the particular matters identified during the Gathering. While the lessons are read, listen for God's wisdom, especially where the energy of the Holy Spirit seems most evident. Words, phrases, and ideas from the lessons which really captivate the imagination may be signs of the Spirit's energy. Pay close attention to those features of the lessons. The preaching minister may proclaim in such a way as to invite listeners more deeply into God's wisdom revealed in the scripture as it pertains to matters at hand for discernment. Again, in some settings like retreats, the preacher may instead lead a conversation during which members of the assembly are invited to identify what they hear in the scriptures that pertains to communal discernment. The Hymn of the Day, along with all of the music during worship, may further reinforce God's living voice. Listen carefully to what you sing! The Prayers of Intercession may be crafted to specifically address the discernment matters, seeking the guidance of the Spirit and staying close to the scriptural themes for the day. Sharing the peace deepens the bonds of affection necessary for effective communal discernment.

Meal

God feeds us with the presence of Jesus Christ.

The offering of gifts, setting the table, and joining together in the features of the Great Thanksgiving set the stage for our being drawn more deeply into Christ who makes himself known to us in the breaking of bread. Jesus' real presence in the Eucharist empowers us to be more fully present to ourselves, each other, and the world. Such vulnerable availability cultivates fertile ground for effective discernment. Moreover, the Communion may open up time and space to simply be with Christ and each other in community and in stillness, perhaps upheld by gentle music or silence. Such openness to dwell in the Word made flesh also nurtures the Spirit for communal discernment and gives us the time and presence to soak in the wisdom revealed to us thus far in worship.

Sending

God blesses us and sends us in mission to the world.

The Sending is the briefest of the movements of the liturgy. We are blessed, dismissed, and are sent on our way with songs on our lips and in our hearts to do the "liturgy after the liturgy," that is, to share in God's work in mission for the sake of the world. However, the Sending may occasion more extensive consideration of what the assembly has discerned over the course of the time for worship. That is to say, the Gathering, Word, and Meal movements of the liturgy may have been so full of God's wisdom for discernment that we need to take more time to let the dust settle and to identify what in fact we have discerned together. Worship leaders may lead a conversation at the liturgy's conclusion, or perhaps during a fellowship hour after the liturgy, which serves to articulate a growing consensus about our responses to the

question of what God would have us be and do. This kind of sending conversation creates an opportunity to really identify the directives evident in the readings, the songs, the proclamation, the prayers, and the meal. Such conversation may also set the stage for decision-making about specific mission opportunities and activities we are called to undertake.

Appendix E

Entering More Deeply into the Paschal Mystery: A Contemplative Eucharist

Propers for Saturday, the Fifth Week of Lent
Saturday, April 16, 2011; 1:30 - 5:00 pm
Seabury Auditorium + The General Theological Seminary
Sponsored by the Center for Christian Spirituality
And the Members of the Liturgical Spirituality Practicum Course

Gathering and Preparation (1:30–2:15)

Welcome and Introduction to the Day

Music to Prepare Hearts and Minds for Worship

Silence for Reflection

Holy Conversation:

As we gather and prepare for worship, and as we are on the brink of entering into Holy Week and our participation in the drama of Jesus' death and resurrection, what, in a word, would you name that is on your heart and mind that you would offer before God at the foot of the cross and/or in the empty tomb?

Acclamation:

Bless the Lord who forgives all our sins.
His mercy endures for ever.

Collect for Purity:

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Prayer Petitions and Trisagion (*Hymnal 1982*, S 102):

Sing the refrain after each petition

Collect for the Day:

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

Let us pray. O Lord, in your goodness you bestow abundant graces on your elect: Look with favor, we entreat you, upon those who in these Lenten days are being prepared for Holy Baptism, and grant them the help of your protection; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Reading (2:15–2:30)

Reading, Ezekiel 37:21–28

Then say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. ²²I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms. ²³They shall never again defile themselves with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. I will save them from all the apostasies into which they have fallen, and will cleanse them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their GOD. ²⁴My servant David

shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. ²⁵They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, in which your ancestors lived; they and their children and their children's children shall live there forever; and my servant David shall be their prince forever. ²⁶I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. ²⁷My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ²⁸Then the nations shall know that I the LORD sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them forevermore.

Silence for Reflection

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sequence Hymn: "O Christ, the Word Incarnate" (*Hymnal 1982*, # 632)

Holy Gospel, John 11:45–53

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to John.

Glory to you, Lord Christ.

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. ⁴⁶But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. ⁴⁷So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. ⁴⁸If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." ⁴⁹But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." ⁵¹He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, ⁵²and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. ⁵³So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

Silence for Reflection

The Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, Lord Christ.

**Meditation
(2:30–3:15)**

Silence for Individual Reflection and Visual Meditation

Holy Conversation:

In these scriptural passages and in your visual meditation with the chosen image that depicts the betrayal and arrest of Jesus, what speaks to you, gives meaning, challenge, insight and/or carries the energy of God's Spirit for you?

**Prayer
(3:15–3:40)**

Music to Invite Prayerfulness

During this time, worshipers may bring forward their images to make a prayerful offering to the Lord our God.

Prayers of the People (Form II, BCP):

In the course of the silence after each bidding, the People offer their own prayers, either silently or aloud.

I ask your prayers for God's people throughout the world; for our Bishops; for this gathering; and for all ministers and people. Pray for the church.

Time for spoken or silent intercessions

I ask your prayers for peace; for goodwill among nations; and for the well-being of all people. Pray for justice and peace.

Time for spoken or silent intercessions

I ask your prayers for the poor, the sick, the hungry, the oppressed, and for those in prison. Pray for those in any need or trouble.

Time for spoken or silent intercessions

I ask your prayers for all who seek God, or a deeper knowledge of him. Pray that they may find and be found by him.

Time for spoken or silent intercessions

I ask your prayers for the departed, especially those whom you name. Pray for those who have died.

Time for spoken or silent intercessions

Members of the assembly may offer additional prayers.

Praise God for those in every generation in whom Christ has been honored, especially those whom we name and remember today. Pray that we may have grace to glorify Christ in our own day.

Time for spoken or silent intercessions

The Celebrant adds a concluding Collect:

O Lord our God, accept the fervent prayers of your people; in the multitude of your mercies, look with compassion upon us and all who turn to you for help; for you are gracious, O lover of souls, and to you we give glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever. **Amen.**

Confession of Sin:

Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor.

Silence

Most merciful God,

We confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. Amen.

The Peace:

The peace of the Lord be always with you. **And also with you.**

Contemplation
(3:40–4:00)

Presentation Hymn: “I Come with Joy to Meet my Lord” (*Hymnal 1982* # 304)

Preface Dialog:

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give him thanks and praise.

Proper Preface:

It is truly right to glorify you, Father, and to give you thanks; for you alone are God, living and true, dwelling in light inaccessible from before time and for ever.

Fountain of life and source of all goodness, you made all things and fill them with your blessing; you created them to rejoice in the splendor of your radiance.

Countless throngs of angels stand before you to serve you night and day; and, beholding the glory of your presence, they offer you unceasing praise. Joining with them, and giving voice to every creature under heaven, we acclaim you, and glorify your Name, as we sing:

Sanctus: (Schubert’s *Deutsche Messe*, *Hymnal 1982*, S 130)

Eucharistic Prayer D (BCP):

We acclaim you, holy Lord, glorious in power. Your mighty works reveal your wisdom and love. You formed us in your own image, giving the whole world into our care, so that, in obedience to you, our Creator, we might rule and serve all your creatures. When our disobedience took us far from you, you did not abandon us to the power of death. In your mercy you came to our help, so that in seeking you we might find you. Again and again you called us into covenant with you, and through the prophets you taught us to hope for salvation.

Father, you loved the world so much that in the fullness of time you sent your only Son to be our Savior. Incarnate by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, he lived as one of us, yet without sin. To the poor he proclaimed the good news of salvation; to prisoners, freedom; to the sorrowful, joy. To fulfill your purpose he gave himself up to death; and, rising from the grave, destroyed death, and made the whole creation new.

And, that we might live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died and rose for us, he sent the Holy Spirit, his own first gift for those who believe, to complete his work in the world, and to bring to fulfillment the sanctification of all.

When the hour had come for him to be glorified by you, his heavenly Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end; at supper with them he took bread, and when he had given thanks to you, he broke

it, and gave it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat: This is my Body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me."

After supper he took the cup of wine; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you: This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me."

Father, we now celebrate this memorial of our redemption. Recalling Christ's death and his descent among the dead, proclaiming his resurrection and ascension to your right hand, awaiting his coming in glory; and offering to you, from the gifts you have given us, this bread and this cup, we praise you and we bless you.

**We praise you, we bless you,
we give thanks to you,
and we pray to you, Lord our God.**

Lord, we pray that in your goodness and mercy your Holy Spirit may descend upon us, and upon these gifts, sanctifying them and showing them to be holy gifts for your holy people, the bread of life and the cup of salvation, the Body and Blood of your Son Jesus Christ.

Grant that all who share this bread and cup may become one body and one spirit, a living sacrifice in Christ, to the praise of your Name.

Remember, Lord, your one holy catholic and apostolic church, redeemed by the blood of your Christ. Reveal its unity, guard its faith, and preserve it in peace.

Remember all who minister in your church. Remember all your people and those who seek your truth. Remember all who have died in the peace of Christ, and those whose faith is known to you alone; bring them into the place of eternal joy and light.

And grant that we may find our inheritance with the Blessed Virgin Mary, with patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and all the saints who have found favor with you in ages past. We praise you in union with them and give you glory through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

Through Christ, and with Christ, and in Christ, all honor and glory are yours, Almighty God and Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. *AMEN.*

Lord's Prayer

And now, as our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say,
Our Father, who art in heaven . . .

Fraction Sentence:

Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us;
Therefore let us keep the feast.

The gifts of God for the people of God.

Communion of the Faithful

Silence for Reflection

Instrumental Music

Post Communion Prayer:

Almighty and everliving God, we thank you for feeding us with the spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; and for assuring us in these holy mysteries that we are living members of the Body of your Son, and heirs of your eternal kingdom. And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord. To him, to you, and to the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

**Incarnation for Mission
(4:00–4:15)**

Holy Conversation:

What living Word from God given to us this day will we bring with us when we leave this place to enter into Holy Week?

Concluding Hymn: “Go to Dark Gethsemane” (*Hymnal 1982, # 171*)

Blessing:

Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bless you now and forever. **Amen.**

Dismissal:

Let us go forth in the name of Christ.
Thanks be to God.

Appendix F: One Congregation's Experience

Summary of discussions and lessons learned:

Each session began with Dwelling in the Word using the above scripture. Small groups of two or three persons discussed their reaction to the reading. Because of the time limitation of meeting between worship services (45 min), we did not spend the desired amount of time in this practice, but it still was a productive experience.

After introducing the background of our task force and some of our recommendations for the last Churchwide Assembly, people felt free to express their thoughts. This first phase was typical, I think, where one brings personal emotions, agenda, and biases forward. The trick here is to listen to all without interjecting rebuttals or objections. The idea of listening in an attempt to respect the speaker and comprehend the message was used throughout and served us well.

Subsequent discussions were lively and interesting as we followed, without direction or prompting, much of the path that our task force has taken. Although much of the early discussion centered on communications, the emphasis shifted to how God speaks to us through scripture, the importance of prayer, ways to invite and welcome the Holy Spirit, and the importance of making a distinction between discerning the will of God and decision making. The phrase, "...renewing your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God." Romans 12:2 was helpful in focusing on the prerequisite for discernment rather than the act itself.

There was general agreement that it is difficult to label a vote taken by a Churchwide Assembly as discerning the will of God by the majority, thus implying that the minority did not. This led to a discussion of validation (similar to the Presbyterian model), where failure to validate the decision would have the issue sent back to the body (Church Council or Conference of Bishops) that submitted it to the assembly.

There is interest in continuing this discussion as an adult (but not restricted to adults) forum during the rest of the year. The suggested study guide, mentioned in our conference call, would provide a needed foundation for discussion in our congregations and would be well received.

Case Study

Purpose:

To consider communal discernment in expressions of the church

Place:

Epiphany Lutheran Church, Richmond, Va.

Participants:

Invited members of the congregation (varied attendance 6–10)

Materials:

*Scripture passages:
Philippians 1:27;
Philippians 2:5-11;
Acts 15:1-25;
Romans 12:2*

Sessions: 5

Appendix G: Preliminary Recommendations for the Churchwide Assembly

These recommendations are in no particular order or priority, as the use of some of them might preclude others. They are submitted to enable the process of deliberation and follow the guidelines previously mentioned to be:

- (a) supportive of those who have not yet arrived at a decision,
- (b) fair in representing multiple perspectives and
- (c) open to the influence of the Holy Spirit.

First, we would like to **affirm the discernment practices that were adopted for the 2009 Churchwide Assembly** and sharpen some of those practices as we move toward future Churchwide Assemblies. Specifically, we affirm the use of **prayer partners, Bible study, and table discussions**.

The use of general prayers for discernment that are open to all outcomes are important enough for us to **recommend that there be no “free” prayers during deliberations**. We suggest that a group be appointed to write prayers to be used throughout the deliberations without a specific order of use. These prayers might also come from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. This would allow the random assignment of prayers to avoid prayers taking any “position” on items on the table. Some have felt that “free” prayer has meant an opportunity for a veiled form of speech to influence responses to the issue on the floor. This method of prayer use should eliminate that concern.

Another prayer option divides the room into sections. These sections could stand and **gather for “local” prayer**. Again, prayers should be provided for the groups to avoid the partisan concerns noted above. One possibility suggests that the small group prayers are used **in a rotation**, so that all are praying the same set of prayers but at different times. This might reinforce the idea of diversified unity.

We recommend the **retention of Robert’s Rules** at this time, but further request a consideration of methods for **percentage approval voting on an experimental basis**; perhaps using “test cases” on issues NOT being decided at this assembly or as a method of rapid evaluation.

Examples of these methods are:

- (1) Give voting members a number of votes—five, for example—which they can use all on one side, portioned out among the choices, or not at all, to indicate dissatisfaction with all alternatives.
- (2) Provide voting members with a range of colored cards from red to green so that they might indicate their relative “warmth” or “coolness” to the point being discussed.

Technology should be employed wherever possible to increase engagement, with appropriate concern for the non-technical participants. For example:

- (1) We recommend consideration of utilizing **text messages to a dedicated number for questions during deliberation**, perhaps even projected so the assembly can see them and provide feedback on which, if any, they would like to see answered.
- (2) Or, explore the option of using a projection format like those used in webinars where **questions are streamed** next to the projected images of the speaker.

Likewise, we **propose that some pre-assembly work** be attempted to see where questions or potential bottlenecks might exist. This might be done on a blog or a FAQ page so that questions could be identified before the assembly. If subject areas where people are not clear about the facts or consequences of

TASK FORCE MEMBERS:

Bishop Jon Anderson
Jon has learned about communal discernment as a farmer’s son in a small town, playing team sports, serving on Bible Camp staffs, in marriage to an artist and parenting three grown children, in many faithful and puzzling congregations and while serving as Bishop.
Southwestern Minnesota Synod
Redwood Falls, Minn.

Bishop Jessica Crist
“Communal discernment gives us an alternative to processes that polarize us, creating winners and losers.”
Montana Synod
Chair, Conference of Bishops
Great Falls, Mont.

Dr. Katie Day (2008–2012)
Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia
Philadelphia, Pa.

Dr. Pat Taylor Ellison
“Communal discernment is the way missional churches keep The Main Thing the main thing. It’s the way we kept moving on our mission.”
Church Innovations Institute
St. Paul, Minn.

Pr. Susan Langhauser
“Called by the Holy Spirit and amazed by this process!”
Advent Lutheran Church
ELCA Church Council, Chair of Planning and Evaluation Committee
Olathe, Kan.

Pr. Jonathan Linman
This particular churchwide engagement has been among the most richly textured and compelling to me – for its own sake, to be sure, but also for the promise our work holds for our whole church.
General Theological Seminary/Metropolitan New York Synod
New York, N.Y.

a resolution could be addressed in advance, it would increase voting member understanding as well as perhaps reducing the time of deliberation.

Since *Robert's Rules* often provoke anxiety among those who are less familiar with its intricacies, ***we propose some modifications and cautions in regard to the use of parliamentary procedure.*** We do, however, commend the continuing work of educating people concerning the benefits of *Robert's Rules* and the rules proposed for the assembly.

We believe that the assembly should ***limit the use of "calling the question on all matters"*** to assure that there is always debate on at least the main motion of all controversial issues. Trust can be reduced when voices are left unheard, especially when there is a perception that the process has been manipulated by those with the most parliamentary expertise.

We suggest that ***use of the "committee of the whole" be carefully considered*** in regard to controversial issues. Some have seen this as a tool which serves special interests, especially those related to changing a policy. If this approach is to be used, we suggest that people on all sides of the issue should be included in a discussion preceding the use of the parliamentary tool of "committee of the whole." Such work in advance of table conversation would serve to increase a variety of perspectives and build trust. In these conversations especially, ***a third microphone, for people who are neither for or against the motion*** but seeking information or clarification, might be used to give voice to those who have not decided their position on an issue.

When to postpone a decision indefinitely is a critical question. We need criteria to help leaders ascertain when this tool is appropriate. Certainly some kind of training about process and the difference between necessary and optional decisions is important.

To conclude these recommendations, we request that, whenever these methods are employed at upcoming assemblies, we encourage a ***prompt evaluation of newly implemented methods*** so there is opportunity for an adjustment by the conveners. Perhaps there could be a show of cards and/or a place for short written comments (possibly at the tables) as a way to make adjustments even during the assembly.

Ms. Kathryn Lohre (2008–2011)
Kathryn was the assistant director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University and is now president of the National Council of Churches U.S.A.
Director, ELCA Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs
Chicago, Ill.

Dr. Joel McKean
"To me, the evolution of this work in progress is more important than the product itself."
President Emeritus, Bethany College
Member of Epiphany Lutheran Church
Richmond, Va.

Dr. Peter T. Nash (2008--2011)
Wartburg College
Waverly, Iowa

Pr. Norene Smith (2008)

Dr. Athornia ("Thorny") Steele (2008--2009)
Nova Southeastern University Law School
Ft. Lauderdale-Davie, Fla.

Prof. Hank Tkachuk
"Commitment to communal discernment is fundamental to the future of our church's decision making."
Concordia College
Moorhead, Minn.

Ms. Suzanne Gibson Wise (*chair*)
"Building a culture of trust is the foundation of communal discernment."
Lutheran Family Services of the Carolinas (retired)
Raleigh, N.C.

Pr. Marcus Kunz
"Communal discerning and deciding is necessarily public and yet clothed (but not hidden) in all the relationships and interactions of community life."
ELCA Office of the Presiding Bishop
Chicago, Ill.

Appendix H

Workshop: Exploring a Biblical Approach to Discernment

The Rev. Jonathan Linman, Ph.D.

Description: What is God’s will for my life and our life together as a church? What would God have me do with my life? What would God have us do as a church? These are questions of discernment, a spiritual practice that is much talked about today, but oftentimes with little understanding of what discernment is or how to practice it. Through interactive exploration of the biblical narrative that describes how Matthias was chosen to replace Judas as one of the twelve (Acts 1:12–26), and through conversation that seeks to apply principles derived from this story to our own discernment questions and issues, this workshop promises to deepen our understanding of discernment as a spiritual practice and give us some practical tools for how to undertake discernment in keeping with the biblical witness in Acts 1.

Introduction (10’):

- This workshop tackles a \$10,000+ question: How do we attempt to figure out what is God’s will for us?
- Attempting to know God’s will: That’s a question of discernment
- Discernment is used a lot in our discourse, but rarely understood
- But discernment is a central Christian spiritual discipline
- And it’s a biblical word with rich meanings
- Etymological explorations of the word discernment:
 - Discern: from the Latin, *discernere* = *dis* (apart) + *cernere* (to separate)
 - Discernment: from the Greek, *diakrisis*, from the root, *krino*, to judge
 - Related also to: *krisis* (judgment, decision, cf. crisis); *krima* (decision, and cf. discrimination); *krieterion* (means of judgment, that is, criteria); *kritikos* (able to judge, cf. critic, critical); *synkrino* (to interpret)
 - So playfully, but helpfully mixing all of this together: discernment is the process that precedes coming to decisions, often through crisis (trouble, but also opportunity), critically separating issues apart (using discriminating tastes and good judgment) and employing criteria for interpretation and finally decision-making
- There are few biblical texts that directly address and thus offer explicit guidance for trying to determine “what would God have me/us in particular to do?”
- But there are ample passages where God gives direct commands to do this or that!
- However, portions of Acts 1 that focus on the process that led to Matthias as the replacement apostle for Judas shed a lot of light on the early followers’ practice post-Ascension of Jesus (when they were on their own)
- In the church, we spend more time, arguably, on decision-making processes and comparatively little time attending to the discernment processes that leads to decision-making
- Here and now: an opening to explore discernment
- At its best, this workshop format, which prayerfully explores scripture and then seeks application of principles to our own circumstances, is itself an exercise of discernment, and not just musing about discernment.

Part One: Explorations of Acts 1:12-26 (20-30’):

- Begin with silent and spoken prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit to guide conversation
- Read Acts 1:12–26 aloud
- Take some time (perhaps up to 5 minutes) for quiet consideration of this question: what are the features of the discernment process revealed in this passage?
- Engage in conversation in response to this question (see below for the kinds of insights that might emerge in conversation)

Movements in and Principles of a Process of Discernment Distilled from Acts 1:12–26

- Identify the issue or matter at hand
 - Vv. 16ff., esp. 21 (need for an apostolic replacement for Judas to join in witness to resurrection)
- Consider criteria for judgment

- o Vv. 21-22 (a man who accompanied the other disciples with Jesus, from the baptism of John to the Ascension)
- Set apart a time and place for discernment
 - o Vv. 12-13a (return from retreat at Mount Olivet; adjourning to a room upstairs)
 - o [Chronological break between v. 14 and 15?]
- Identify a leader to facilitate the process
 - o V. 15 (Peter stood up among the believers)
- Gather a representative and inclusive group
 - o Vv. 13-14 (named disciples, plus women; and then 120 total in crowd)
- Devote yourselves to prayer practices
 - o V. 14a (they were constantly devoting themselves to prayer)
- Dwell deeply with scripture
 - o V. 16, 20 (scripture had to be fulfilled; written in the book of Psalms -- but proof texting?)
- Engage in conversation
 - o Vv. 15ff. (Peter's speech-making, interpreting history and events via scripture)
- Identify your options
 - o V. 23 (Joseph/Barsabbas/Jusus and Matthias, possibly many more options?)
- Prayerfully examine your hearts
 - o V. 24 (Lord, you know everyone's heart)
- Pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance
 - o Vv. 24-25 (Lord, show us which one of these you have chosen)
- Engage a decision-making process
 - o V. 26 (casting lots)
- When conforming to the principles of God's will, there may be more than one faithful decision (either Joseph/Barsabbas/Justus our Matthias would have served well)
- With good discernment as a foundation, decision-making processes take on less importance (here it was casting lots)
- Discernment involves seeking God's choice not ours
- **Participants may well name features of the passage not described above!**

Part Two: Applying Discernment Principles to our Circumstances (20-30'):

- Part Two involves conversation about hypothetical exercises in discernment, using movements from Acts 1:12-26, and applying them to "case studies," questions or circumstances offered by participants
- Introduce "Movements in a Process of Discernment" document, showing how movements relate to Acts 1 (cf. following page here)
- What are some particular discernment questions? What are some concrete issues and circumstances that would benefit from discernment?
- Invite a volunteer to offer aloud a "case study," question, issue, or set of circumstances to be a focus of a discernment conversation in this workshop
- Use "Movements in a Process of Discernment" document as a guide to develop an approach to a discernment process in re: particular circumstances. Using this as a guide, explore in conversation how we might go about discernment
- As time allows, invite others to offer "case studies," etc., again exploring what a discernment process might look like for the case in question
- Conclude by commending these principles/movements for use "back home"
- End the workshop with prayer for the Holy Spirit's ongoing guidance in our many and various discernment undertakings

One to Replace Judas: A Biblical Discernment Process

Acts 1:12–26

¹²Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. ¹³When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. ¹⁵In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, ¹⁶“Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus—¹⁷for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.” ¹⁸(Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. ¹⁹This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) ²⁰“For it is written in the book of Psalms, ‘Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it’; and ‘Let another take his position of overseer.’ ²¹So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²²beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” ²³So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” ²⁶And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

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www.TheWorldCafe.com

www.thrivinginchange.org

Communal Discernment is:

- *Prayerful*
- *Discerning, discriminating*
- *Undertaken as fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 4:22-23)*
- *Impassioned, enthused*
- *Visionary, curious, imaginative, playful, creative*
- *Vulnerable, honest*
- *Transparent, genuine*
- *Compassionate, merciful, courteous, respectful*
- *Hospitable, welcoming*
- *Appreciative, loving*
- *Relationship focused*
- *Spacious, leisurely*
- *Comfortable with silence*
- *Appropriately detached*
- *Intentional, habitual*
- *Conversational*
- *Undertaken with a good sense of humor*
- *Process (not outcomes) oriented, but courageous and patient with implications and consequences*
- *Circuitous, non-linear*
- *Fair-minded*
- *Sensitive to timing*
- *Attentive to group dynamics*
- *Studied, well-reasoned*
- *Like all human involvements, captive to sin*
- *Undertaken with astute self-knowledge*
- *Patient with conflict*
- *Steeped in tradition, and attentive to contemporary contexts*
- *Fluid, organic, emergent*
- *Ecumenical and conversant with wider worlds beyond the church*
- *Global and diverse in perspective*
- *Mission-minded and focused*