



Becoming...
A five-week pastoral reflection series
Pastoral Reflection #5
Learning to Discern Together

What might it look like if discernment became part of the culture of our synod? Not another program. Not another strategic initiative. Simply part of how we are church together.

Imagine a church council beginning a difficult conversation by asking, “Where is God already at work among us?” Imagine a call committee asking not only, “What kind of pastor do we want?” but also, “Who is God calling this congregation to become?”

Imagine a congregation facing uncertainty and taking time to remember where God has been faithful before deciding what comes next. Imagine ministry teams, conferences, congregations, synod committees, and the Office of the Bishop becoming more practiced at listening, wondering, praying, and paying attention.

I think that would change us. Not because we would suddenly have all the answers. We wouldn’t. But perhaps we would become less anxious about having them. Discernment is not about finding the perfect answer. It is about learning to recognize God’s invitation together.

And there may be a particular reason this practice matters right now.

For a number of years, some of us have used the acronym **VUCA** to describe the world around us: volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. More recently, another acronym has emerged: **BANI** — brittle, anxious, nonlinear, and incomprehensible.

Those words feel familiar to me.

Things that once seemed dependable can suddenly break. Anxiety makes us crave quick answers and immediate action. The effort we put into something does not always produce the result we expected. And sometimes, even with all the information available to us, we still cannot quite make sense of what is happening.

I recognize those realities in the world around us. I recognize them in the church too.

Congregations that seemed stable find themselves facing sudden change. Leaders feel pressure to solve problems quickly. Ministries that worked faithfully for decades no longer produce the same results. Communities ask questions for which there simply are no easy answers.

In a world like that, it is tempting to believe that what we need most is a better plan. Sometimes we do need a better plan. But planning is not the same thing as discernment.

When the future is difficult to predict, faithful leadership cannot simply mean knowing what comes next. It means cultivating communities that can remain grounded enough to

pay attention. Communities that can listen before reacting. Communities willing to learn and adapt. Communities humble enough to admit that none of us sees the whole picture.

That is the kind of leadership we have been exploring throughout these reflections: ask better questions, tell truthful stories, learn to see through the eyes of Jesus, listen to what others notice, and together, discern the next faithful step.

That also describes the kind of leadership we are trying to practice in the Office of the Bishop. When a congregation reaches out to us, our first calling is not to arrive with a solution. It is to listen.

What has been happening here? What has this congregation lived through? Where is there grief? Where is there life? Who are the leaders already emerging? What is God doing that perhaps no one has named yet? Then we begin wondering together about the next faithful step.

We have been trying to work this way for years, although we have not always had language for it. And I say *trying* intentionally. We don't always get it right. Sometimes we speak too quickly. Sometimes we miss something important. Sometimes we ask the wrong question—or fail to ask the question that matters most.

Like every congregation in this synod, the Office of the Bishop is still becoming too. We are still learning how to accompany rather than direct, how to listen before speaking, and how to trust that the Holy Spirit is at work long before we arrive.

Perhaps that is one of the gifts of being a synod. We do more than gather once a year. We do more than share resources. We accompany one another.

When one congregation is struggling, another may be able to see possibilities it cannot yet see. When leaders are tired, someone else can carry hope for a while. When we are unsure what comes next, we can listen, pray, wonder, and discern together. We remind one another that none of us has to do this alone.

The verse that has accompanied us through this year continues to speak to me:

“Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.”
—1 John 3:2

I love the tension in that verse.

We are God’s children now. And: What we will be has not yet been revealed.

Both are true.

Maybe that is an especially important word for a brittle, anxious, nonlinear, incomprehensible world. We do not know exactly what the future will look like. We do not know exactly what every congregation will become. We do not know what forms ministry will take ten or twenty years from now. And Scripture does not ask us to pretend that we do. What we will be has not yet been revealed.

But our identity is: **Beloved**. We are God's children **now**.

Our congregations are still becoming. Our leaders are still becoming. Our synod is still becoming. The Office of the Bishop is still becoming. But we do not have to become worthy of God's love.

We begin there. Beloved **now**. And from that place, perhaps we can loosen our grip on the need to know everything that comes next. We can listen. We can pay attention. We can ask better questions. We can learn from one another. We can trust the Holy Spirit enough to discern together. And then we can take the next faithful step.

God is not finished with us yet.

Thanks be to God.

+ Bp. Sue