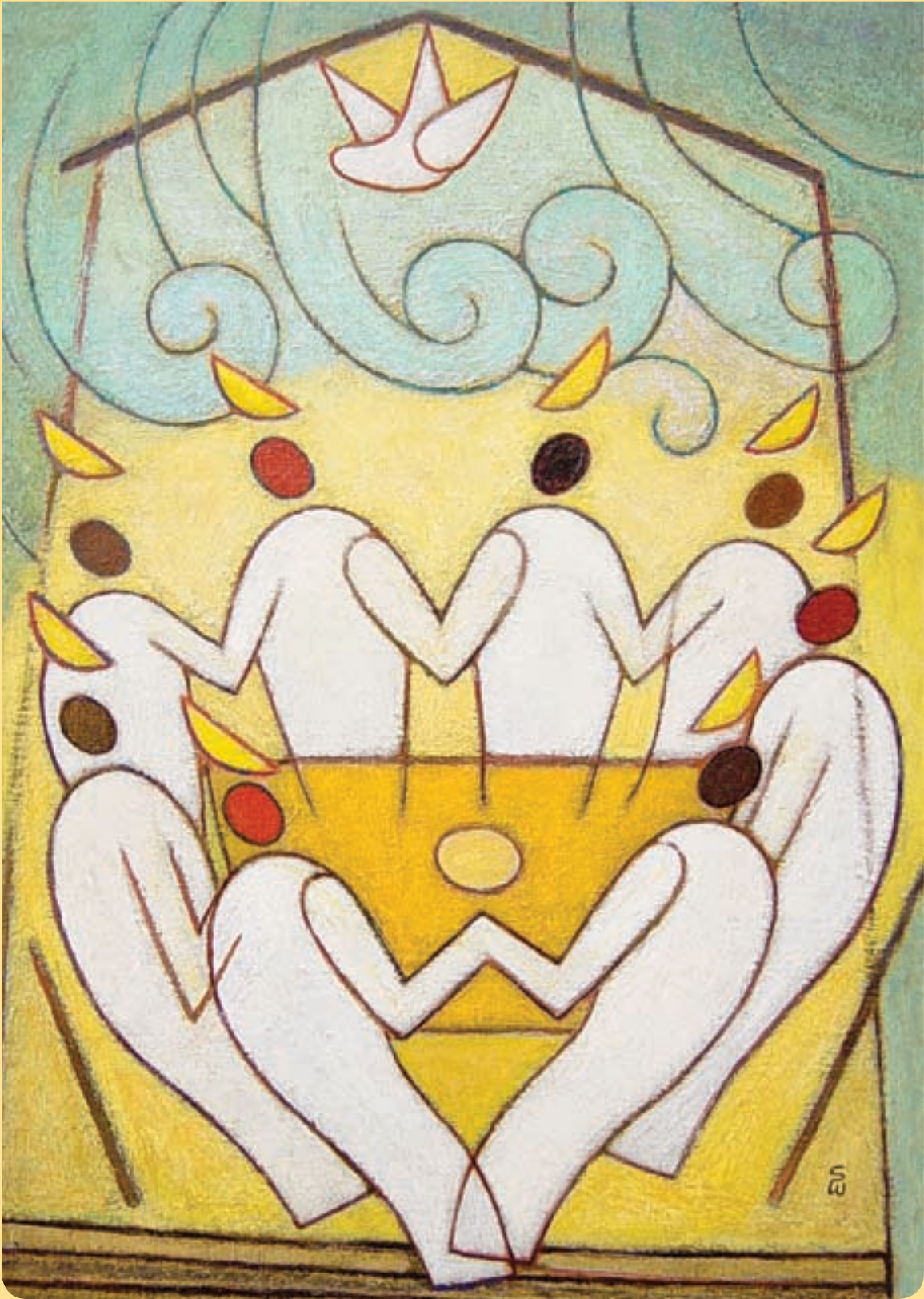


Guidelines for **Communal Discernment**



By Victoria G. Curtiss

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Reflections and Feedback

Reflections and feedback on the use of *Guidelines for Communal Discernment* may be sent to the offices of the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program.

Send your comments to:

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As Presbyterian Christians—spiritual heirs of John Calvin—we, like that great Reformer, are committed to collegial dialogue and mutual accountability within the human community. “Indeed,” writes Paul in 1 Corinthians 12, “the body does not consist of one member but of many” (vs. 14).

Because we are regularly called upon to work together as one body in a variety of groupings and contexts throughout the Church, it is our sacred duty to build and to nurture the relationships that will allow us to function as a whole. It is the Holy Spirit that makes such an enterprise possible, even in the face of potentially divisive issues.

We find, as we regularly travel across the church, that Presbyterians love to talk. At times, such talk can lead to debates—and even disputes—that serve to divide rather than unite. We are impressed, however, with the number of Presbyterians in so many settings who are using discernment practices as they seek the mind of Christ when wrestling with matters of faith and belief. Everywhere Presbyterians are intentionally reaching out to others, building renewed foundations of trust and respect, and communicating more openly. All across the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Holy Spirit is enabling us as the community—and communities—that we are to be an ever more powerful witness to the peace, unity, and purity of Jesus Christ.

We commend to you this new resource, and invite you to refer to it often. The guidelines presented here are not intended to replace the standard tools and rules that groups and committees use to govern themselves, but rather to complement them. Our hope is that this instructive work will help us all to recognize that our decision-making is always a matter of seeking the will of God, whether individually or together.

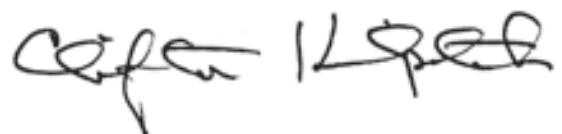
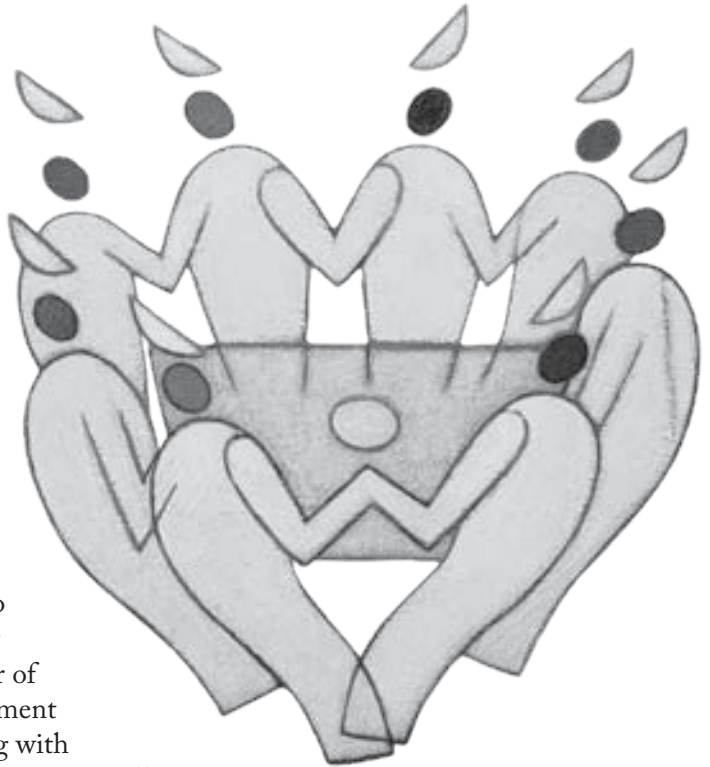
In reflecting upon her experience in the pastorate, the Reverend Laura Mendenhall, president of Columbia Theological Seminary, said, “We knew that when our meetings were wrapped in prayer, we actually began to work with perhaps a bit more cooperation and a deeper spirit of creativity. The work was more focused. We had a sense that this was not something we were in by ourselves. This was actually God’s business anyway, and we were simply privileged to be invited to the table. It wasn’t about us.”

She concluded by saying, “Such awareness of the Holy Spirit meant that we were willing to take risks for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” May it be so for each of us.

Faithfully yours,



Linda Bryant Valentine
Executive Director
General Assembly Council



Clifton Kirkpatrick
Stated Clerk of the General Assembly

Guidelines for Communal Discernment

By the Reverend Victoria G. Curtiss

What Is Communal Discernment?

Discernment is a gift of the Holy Spirit that orients persons to be attentive to the presence of God in our midst. In discernment, persons sift through the many spirits that vie for our attention to hear the One True Spirit.¹ Discernment may be described as a means to:

- ▶ recognize and acknowledge what God is doing and what God desires;
- ▶ see a situation from God's perspective;
- ▶ listen to the Holy Spirit, who prays within and among us;
- ▶ hear and obey God's voice.

Communal discernment engages a group of people to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. It involves prayer, a humble surrendering of control, reflection on Scripture, and listening carefully to one another as together we seek to hear God's voice.

The movement of God's Spirit cannot be predicted or packaged. However, there are spiritual practices that can enable us to be more receptive and attentive to God and one another and help us discern the mind of Christ.

Several dimensions distinguish discernment from other approaches to decision making.² Prayer is incorporated throughout, with times of silence for listening to the Holy Spirit. The interpretation and application of Scripture is central. Time is taken to hear many voices. Values, concerns, hopes, and fears are named more than positions. Intuition, experience, reason, tradition, and new insights are all welcome sources for reflection. Common direction is sought through cooperation and collaboration.

Discernment seeks more than group agreement. The goal is to recognize when "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). Sometimes that recognition comes when God's presence settles over the group in silence. Sometimes there is a joyous convergence of direction that brings a sense of peace and rightness. When the deepest desires of persons are aligned with God's deepest desires, life is marked by loving more freely, becoming dedicated to a larger goodness, and experiencing healing and reconciliation with God, oneself, and one another.³

Questions can also be asked to test possible leadings of the Holy Spirit, such as:

- a. Is this leading in keeping with the Word of God as revealed in Jesus Christ through Scripture?
- b. Are there examples from the past that may provide direction for the present?
- c. Is this leading self-serving, or is it motivated by love for God and others?
- d. Does it matter who gets the credit?
- e. Is the ministry of Jesus being continued in what we do?
- f. Will the community benefit—will the outcome build up the body of Christ?⁴

Why Does the Church Engage in Communal Discernment?

Communal discernment is based on several theological principles:

Christ Is Head of the Church. Presbyterians affirm that "God has put all things under the Lordship of Christ and has made Christ Head of the Church, which is his body."⁵ "All ... decisions should be founded upon the revealed will of God."⁶ When ruling and teaching elders gather they "are not simply to reflect the will of the people, but rather to seek together to find and represent the will of Christ."⁷

The Holy Spirit. God sends us the Holy Spirit to guide us into all the truth, to teach us everything, and to remind us of all that Jesus Christ said (John 14:16, 26; 16:13). "Discernment of spirits" is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit given for the common good (1 Cor. 12:1–11).

Unity of the Body. The church is called to the one hope of its calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God of all (Eph. 4:4–6). The Apostle Paul made his appeal: "that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose" (1 Cor. 1:10). Christians are exhorted to "be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests,

but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:2–5).

Covenant Community. Just as Samuel needed Eli to recognize God’s call to him (1 Sam. 3:1–18), so Christians need one another to discern the Holy Spirit’s leading. We are people of the covenant, who best understand the truth of God in and through community. It is important to honor all voices, all parts of Christ’s body. Diversity is one of the church’s most important gifts for discernment. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit ... God has so arranged the body ... that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another” (1 Cor. 12:12–13, 24–25).

Waiting upon God’s Timing. We “wait for the Lord;” in God’s Word we hope (Ps. 130:5). The discernment of God’s direction takes time. “There are truths and forms with respect to which [persons] of good characters and principles may differ.” It is a Christian duty “to exercise mutual forbearance” toward one another,⁸ and to continue to engage with one another until a shared sense of the Holy Spirit’s leading becomes clear.

When Is Communal Discernment Helpful?

A discernment process is not needed for all types of decision-making. Some considerations to determine whether discernment would be helpful include:

Parliamentary procedure is helpful when

- ▶ dealing with routine organizational business
- ▶ an issue has near or full consensus
- ▶ clear alternatives have been identified and further discussion is not likely to surface more options
- ▶ delaying a decision is not an option
- ▶ participants are comfortable with parliamentary procedure
- ▶ the group is willing to accept majority rule when a common direction cannot be found

Communal discernment is helpful when

- ▶ dealing with significant matters that affect the whole body
- ▶ a sizable minority or range of views is present
- ▶ more voices or ideas need to be included
- ▶ time can be taken to explore more options and build consensus
- ▶ a diversity of cultural backgrounds is present
- ▶ persistent and substantial division exists

Who Uses a Communal Discernment Process?

The process of discernment may be used at the congregational, presbytery, synod, and General Assembly levels by committees, response teams, administrative commissions, councils, and large plenary groups.

Groups larger than twenty persons will likely need to divide into subgroups of five to ten persons periodically during the process. The subgroups should be facilitated by designated persons who are oriented to their role. Part of that role is feeding input from the subgroups into a writing team or coordinating team to move the process forward. The coordinating team may take the feedback to a gathering outside of the plenary meeting to create a consolidated report to bring back to the whole assembly or they may share it in a fishbowl fashion for the plenary group to observe. See Appendix B for further information on using discernment in large groups.

How Does the Process Unfold?

Discernment may be described simply as praying, listening, choosing. However, it may be helpful to think of the discernment process as having distinct stages. These are:

- I. **The Community Gathers in Christ:** build community, affirm a covenant, and clarify the issue
- II. **The Community Listens to the Holy Spirit:** let go, reflect on Scripture, share information, name options, and weigh options
- III. **The Community Goes Forth as God’s People:** choose direction, rest with the direction, and make a formal decision.

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A group may engage in these stages in one gathering, over the course of several gatherings, or over more than one day in a meeting that lasts several days. For example, if a group engages in the process over three gatherings, some natural breaks would be to build community and affirm a covenant in one meeting; clarify the issue through share information in another; and name options through make a formal decision in a third gathering. Another possibility would be to follow the process through choosing direction in one meeting, rest with the direction between meetings, and at a second meeting make a formal decision.

Prayer is a central dimension of discernment. Participants are encouraged to be in a prayerful mode of openness and receptivity throughout the discernment process. Times of silence and singing may be observed periodically to help make space to listen for and reflect upon the leading of the Holy Spirit.⁹ Facilitators and group members need to be attentive to any waning of the centered state of the group. A minute or two of silence can often bring the group back to a centered place. It is also helpful to engage periodically in prayerful reflection through *lectio divina* or the *prayer of examen*.¹⁰

I. The Community Gathers in Christ

Participants need to claim their common calling in Christ. This may be strengthened by studying Scripture and worshipping together, including the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Remembering our common heritage in faith by learning about the history, theology, and governance of the church and affirming shared theological convictions are also helpful.

A. Build Community. The stronger the relationships among persons, the more likely they will be able to discern faithfully God's will. Ongoing effort should be given to help people know one another as persons beyond positions. Ways to strengthen trust and build community include using name tags, sharing personal joys and concerns, praying for one another, taking time for informal conversation and refreshment, answering community-building questions, praying through *lectio divina*, and inviting regular "check-ins" on what people are feeling and thinking.¹¹

B. Affirm a Covenant. For persons to participate fully in the discernment process it is important that they are

clear about and agree to the principles and the process to be followed. Before approaching any particular issue, it is advisable for a group to make a commitment about how they will interact with one another and how they will make a decision. The covenant reflects the values, beliefs, hopes, and behavioral norms that guide the participants' engagement. See Appendix C for a sample covenant.

Guidelines that may be part of, or additions to, a covenant include the following:

- Gather good data and basic factual information, identifying alternatives and possibilities.
- Keep all possible options open in order that creativity may contribute to the process.
- Lay aside all biases and blocks to the Holy Spirit, leaving the outcome to God's direction, being willing to consider new ideas, and being obedient to the results.
- Maintain a community and climate of worship so that the central question is not "What is the group consensus?" but "What is the leading of Christ in our midst?"
- Ask and respond to the question, "Where have we sensed God's affirmation in what we have been about?"
- Spend time in reflection and prayer, listening for God's intimations of the future and hints of God's direction.
- Share with the community what one has seen, heard, or felt in the reflection time and listen for insight and wisdom in the dialogue, for "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7).
- Remain humble. Be aware God may be speaking through another person. No one possesses all of God's truth.
- Wait for God's timing. Continue to ask God for direction during the waiting. Speaking with a united voice depends on waiting long enough to receive a common sense of leading.
- Distinguish preference from conviction. If disagreement is a matter of preference, release your viewpoint to those gathered and do not stand in the way.
- When consensus begins to emerge, continue to offer all plans and commitment to God for reshaping.¹²

C. Clarify the Issue. The question or issue that is the focus for discernment needs to be identified clearly. The group may also name some guiding principles or parameters for the discernment. For example, when the disciples chose a replacement for Judas in their circle, they decided it should be someone who had accompanied them while Jesus was alive (Acts 1:21–22).

II. The Community Listens to the Holy Spirit

A. Let Go. Participants are encouraged to approach discernment prayerfully, letting go of any barriers to being totally receptive to the Holy Spirit's leading. Participants need to practice the grace to lay aside ego, preconceived notions, biases, and predetermined conclusions that may limit openness to God in order to reach "holy indifference." Holy indifference means being indifferent to all but God's will. It does not mean, "I don't care." While we do not abandon our values and convictions, we are called to be open and focused above all on what God desires for this particular time and matter. "Holy indifference" challenges us to wrestle with the question, "Are we willing to let something die to give God room for something new?"¹³ This includes our expectations for when clarity or closure may be reached.

Preparing for discernment through the *prayer of examen*¹⁴ can release blocks to listening to others and the Holy Spirit. Participants may also be encouraged to let go through a shared ritual as they worship together. Each participant may be invited to write on an index card anything that he or she is aware of that may block "holy indifference." This could include past hurts, preconceived or hoped-for outcomes, or difficulty with listening to a particular person or group of persons. These cards may be placed in an offering basket or set aside to signify a willingness to allow the Holy Spirit to work.

B. Reflect on Scripture. Scripture passages that relate to the issue at hand are recommended for both individual and corporate study and reflection prior to engaging in deliberation. This may entail a study of overarching themes in Scripture or of particular texts. Praying with Scripture through *lectio divina* may also be done.¹⁵ Additional resources could also be made available for common study and reflection. Participants draw on wisdom from biblical texts, their spiritual heritage, and their own experiences as people of faith that illumine the matters to be discerned.

C. Share Information. Before a large group considers an issue, it is usually helpful for a subgroup, preferably consisting of persons with a variety of perspectives on the matter, to meet first to consider what information the larger body needs. It is helpful to distribute, in advance of the meeting, written material that defines the issue and provides background information as well as the rationale for a particular proposal, if there is one. Such material does not preclude the consideration of other options, but brings the whole body on board with the reflection previously done by a few persons.

Once a proposal or question is put before the body, information is shared orally as well as in writing. Participants are encouraged to generate questions, both for clarification and to explore new ground. Concerns, reservations, interests, and new possibilities may also be shared at this time. These expressions may lead to the gathering of additional information, the exploration of a new option, or the modification of the initial proposal.

Any part of the above process may be engaged in by small groups rather than in plenary. Listening for the Holy Spirit and to one another is enhanced by such tools as Mutual Invitation,¹⁶ Polarity Management,¹⁷ prayerful listening, and silence. Focus groups, consultations, and conversations with persons beyond the circle of those who are discerning direction can also be used. When small groups are used, it is important to relay their input to the whole body.

D. Name Options. The body may work together to articulate a particular direction that grows out of prayerful reflection and listening to various perspectives and concerns. Or the group may want to identify several possible options in response to the issue being discerned. A group may engage in brainstorming—naming a variety of ideas without making any evaluative responses. If many options result from the brainstorming, they can be reduced to a workable number by having group members identify which three to five they want to explore further.

E. Weigh Options. If there are several options to consider, the group then weighs or evaluates the options in response to the leading of God's Spirit. Discernment differs from debate in that:

- ▶ time is given for silent reflection and prayer over each possible option, before each person offers his or her input, and again after the whole group has shared;

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- participants work collaboratively as one body, without persons being identified with positions.

Options may be weighed through open conversation. Three other, more structured approaches are:

Good upon Good. In this approach, no weaknesses are pointed out in the options under consideration. Each person prays silently about the options, looking only for the good in each, and asking which has the weightier good. Persons are asked to be silent and reflect on these questions: “Where does the Holy Spirit rest? Which alternative draws us closer to God and leads to consolation (sense of rightness, peace, alignment with God)?”¹⁸ The group gathers and persons name the good they see in each option. Good is added to good. Then each person prays alone, seeking the weightier good. The group reconvenes and shares their reflections on the weightier good.

Advantages and Disadvantages. Each person individually prays over each option, then lists the advantages and disadvantages of both doing and not doing each option. Then persons come together and each shares his or her lists without comments from others except for clarification. The advantages and disadvantages may be written for all to see. After all have been heard, each person spends time in silent prayer, and then writes a provisional decision on a piece of paper. The group reconvenes and each person shares her or his provisional decision, giving one or two key reasons why that provisional decision was chosen.

Negatives First, Then Positives. This approach places the sharing of negative feedback before the positive. John Futrell wrote, “Negative reasons always generate negative emotions which, in turn, cause aggressive feelings. Stating the cons first enables one to release these feelings and to be truly open to the pros. It does not put the pros into a privileged position, but simply makes it possible to really hear them.”¹⁹

Each person first prays in silence and reflects on the negative aspects of each option. These are then shared with the whole group without debate. Only questions for clarification are voiced. After everyone has shared, individuals pray in silence and reflect on the positive aspects of each option. These are then shared with the whole group without debate. Only questions for clarification are voiced. After everyone has shared,

individuals then pray in silence and reflect about all that has been shared. The group reconvenes and evaluates the positives and negatives, working collaboratively to sense an emerging consensus.

III. The Community Goes Forth as God’s People

Consensus as used in this booklet does not mean unanimity. It refers to a shared sense of God’s presence as manifest through the group’s work together and through the decision reached. Members of the group affirm that they have been heard and are willing to move ahead in a common direction that most, if not all, have sensed to be the leading of the Holy Spirit.

A. Choose Direction. The facilitator’s role is to mirror to the group what may be emerging as a consensus for direction. This is done by articulating a “trial balloon,” a summary statement based on group input that expresses where the Holy Spirit seems to be leading the body. The “trial balloon” is often formulated by the facilitator but may come from a group member. Persons may then be asked to indicate their level of support for the trial balloon. This can be gauged through conversation or a straw poll by a show of hands of how many are supportive. Another form of a straw poll is the Five Finger Method.





Five Finger Method. All at the same time, participants hold up the number of fingers that conveys their level of support for the trial balloon:

Five fingers = I am fully supportive.

Four fingers = I am mostly in agreement and am willing to support the majority.

Three fingers = I have questions or reservations but am willing to stand aside; or I am not persuaded and need to hear more from those who support this.

Two fingers = I am somewhat opposed and have concerns.

One finger = I cannot support this at this time.

- A group needs to have the same understanding of what each level means.
- A group also needs to decide in advance what level of support determines whether they will take the next step. Usually if participants all support the trial balloon at levels 5 and 4, consensus can be declared. If persons signify levels 3, 2, or 1, more time is usually taken to respond to questions and concerns and possibly modify the option, direction, or timetable. Once a high level of support is assessed, the facilitator confirms with the group the direction to pursue.

Colored Cards. A way to assess levels of support while discussion is occurring is through the use of colored cards. In the Uniting Church of Australia Assembly, each delegate is given an orange card to signify support and a blue card to signify opposition. Delegates show these cards after each speech made by a delegate. This aids those assembled and the presiding officer as they seek to sense the mind of the assembly. This helps avoid repetitious speeches and assists the movement toward consensus, as the group gauges levels of support for various ideas.

B. Rest with the Direction. Allow some time to pass before making the decision official.²⁰ Resting allows time for the likely direction to lie near the heart in a spirit of prayer to determine whether it brings primarily feelings of consolation (a sense of peace and movement toward God) or desolation (distress and movement away from God).²¹

C. Make a Formal Decision. The final decision needs to be recorded. A group may return to the use of parliamentary procedure to formalize the decision through a motion that is passed and recorded in the minutes. Or the written

record may say, “The body has discerned that...” Any dissent may also be recorded if desired.

If a group does not complete discernment within the time allowed, is seriously divided, or reaches an impasse, several options may be considered. The group can:

- revisit the guiding principle(s), seek again to reach “holy indifference,” and then repeat the discernment process
- take time for further prayer and reflection
- identify issues about which agreement has been reached
- identify issues that remain to be resolved at a later time
- identify possible steps for further exploration, perhaps by repeating some of the discernment process
- appoint a smaller group or a person to make the decision
- vote by majority rule or supermajority rule
- drop the matter

What Preparation Is Needed?

Introducing Communal Discernment

It is wise to teach an overview of the discernment process before engaging in it. Discussing the “Process Steps” found in Appendix A or how discernment differs from debate as found in Appendix I can be useful starting points. Developing a covenant is a crucial early step. Portions of the discernment process may be taught and practiced before engaging in the whole process. Community can be built with personal sharing and prayer. Persons could use Mutual Invitation during times of dialogue to deepen their listening skills. Times of silence interwoven between times of sharing could be incorporated in worship or with other matters of business. Inviting persons to pray and share after using *lectio divina* or studying the Scripture together can strengthen relationships and prayerful reflection. It is always important to train small group leaders when small groups are used.

Interfacing with Robert’s Rules of Order

Some people believe that the parliamentary procedures defined in *Robert’s Rules of Order, Newly Revised (RONR)* are antithetical to discernment, but that is not accurate.

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The intent of *RONR* is a carefully structured discernment of ideas. There are various methods for using discernment available within *RONR*. One can be as simple as the moderator beginning a discussion by only taking questions until everyone has the information they need to proceed. Section 52 of *RONR* describes two processes, “committee of the whole” and “informal consideration,” that can allow for a wider discussion. “Aids to the Crystallization of Opinion”²² establishes small breakout groups with appointed moderators. Input from the small groups may be reported directly to the body after it has reconvened or it may be conveyed to a committee that attempts to report a consolidated response to the body. A more formal procedure that allows for considering multiple options is “Filling Blanks.”²³ This process allows the body to view all the options at one time. *Robert’s Rules of Order* and discernment can be partners when church bodies come together to seek the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Meeting Space

For a group of twenty or fewer, it is best to use a room in which persons can be seated face-to-face, such as in a circle or around a square table. With larger groups, spaces for small groups to meet are needed. The discernment process should be engaged within a worshipful atmosphere. The space should be free of noise distractions. It is helpful to create a worship center as a visual reminder that we seek to know the mind of Christ. This may include such items as a lighted candle, an open Bible, and/or symbolic objects such as a chalice and plate. Musical instruments to accompany singing are also helpful.

Roles and Their Functions

At least two roles need to be filled in a discernment process.

Facilitator. The facilitator holds the group accountable to its covenant, invites input from group members, observes the dynamics in the group as well as the content of what is offered, calls for times of prayer, refocuses dialogue when needed, and voices a “trial balloon” to articulate an emerging direction. The moderator of a group may serve as facilitator or may designate another to fulfill this role.

Scribe. The scribe records comments, options, trial balloons, and resolutions during the course of the process in a way that all can see (projected screen, newsprint, chalkboard).

When a final resolution is determined the scribe writes the exact wording to record in the minutes. The clerk of a group may serve as scribe.

Other roles can be helpful:

Monitor. The monitor may assist the facilitator by observing the dynamics and interaction among group members, reminding the group of its norms and values, helping pace the process by tracking the time allotted, and recommending breaks or time-outs.

Intercessor. An intercessor is someone who does not actively participate in the process but is visibly present in the group and holds the group in prayer as they proceed.

Taking Time

“In group discernment, we live from God’s movement, not our clocks and calendars. In the Ignatian understanding of discernment, God speaks in peace, clarity, and usually slowly.”²⁴

Time limitations can highly diminish the fullness and effectiveness of a discernment process. It is advisable that the docket or format for a gathering be designed in advance by a small group of persons who know the content of issues coming before the body. This design group could be an ongoing group or it may be designated for a particular meeting. It is helpful for the design group to be composed of persons who represent the diversity of the body.

The design group needs to anticipate, as much as possible, which issues that come before the body may be addressed more helpfully by a discernment process. If the docket of a given meeting needs to include more than the issue to be discerned, the design group should limit the number of matters that the body will consider to allow enough time for the discernment process.

An issue under discernment may need to be addressed over the course of more than one meeting. All depends on the range of views, the complexity of the matter, and how much time it takes to build consensus. Reaching a decision may take longer in a discernment process than with parliamentary procedure. However, the time required to implement that decision is often reduced because ownership is built while discerning direction, and relationships are strengthened. What is essential is not how efficiently a decision can be made but whether the group follows the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Additional Resources

- ▶ Curtiss, Victoria. *Resources for Fostering Community and Dialogue*—various tools include Mutual Invitation, Polarity Management, Graced Communal History, prayerful listening, and community-building questions. Download from www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity or order a “Resource CD of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church” from Presbyterian Distribution Service by calling (800) 524-2612 for PDS# OGA-06-087.
- ▶ Doughty, Stephen V. *The Way of Discernment, Participant’s Book*, Nashville, Tennessee: Upper Rooms, 2008.
- ▶ Thompson, Marjorie J. *The Way of Discernment, Leader’s Guide*, Nashville, Tennessee: Upper Rooms, 2008.
- ▶ Fendall, Lon, Jan Wood and Bruce Bishop. *Practicing Discernment Together: Finding God’s Way Forward in Decision Making*, Newberg, Oregon: Barclay Press, 2007.
- ▶ Melander, Rochelle and Harold Eppley. *Community Builders—50 Exercises for Church Groups*, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Fortress, 1998.
- ▶ Morris, Danny E. and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together—A Spiritual Practice for the Church*, Nashville, Tennessee: Upper Room Books, 1997.
- ▶ *Seeking to Be Faithful: Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement*, approved by the 204th General Assembly (1992) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Copies available through Presbyterian Distribution Service. PDS# 259-93-928 (English); PDS# 259-93-933 (Spanish). Call (800) 524-2612 to order.



Appendix A

Process Steps by Victoria G. Curtiss

STAGES	STEPS	OPTIONS TO CHOOSE AMONG
The Community Gathers in Christ	Build Community	Make introductions Ask community-building questions Worship Pray about joys and concerns Pray through <i>lectio divina</i> Do personal check-in Provide for fellowship and refreshments
	Affirm a Covenant	Develop norms Name values and commitments
	Clarify the Issue	State the issue clearly Identify guiding principles
The Community Listens to the Holy Spirit	Let Go	Pray to set aside one's own preconceived agenda Through <i>prayer of examen</i> , offer up any blocks to being open to God's leading
	Share Information	Distribute written materials in advance Solicit questions Listen to outside input Gather additional information
	Reflect on Scripture and matters of faith	Study pertinent passages Reflect on teachings of Scripture and make theological applications Pray through <i>lectio divina</i>
	Name Options	Use "Mutual Invitation" to identify interests and concerns Brainstorm possible directions Select a workable number of options
	Weigh Options	Engage in open conversation Use "Good upon Good" Use "Negatives First, Then Positives" Use "Advantages and Disadvantages"
The Community Goes Forth as God's People	Choose Direction	Articulate a trial balloon Assess consensus by taking a straw poll through a show of hands, the "Five Finger Method," or conversation and colored cards
	Rest with the Direction	Let time test the rightness of direction
	Make a Formal Decision	Formally affirm decision and record in minutes Take more time to discern Appoint a subgroup for more work Name areas of agreement Identify issues to deal with later Vote by majority vote Drop the matter

Appendix B

Ways to Deliberate with Large Groups¹

Truly listening to one another is best done in groups of no more than eight to ten. Gatherings larger than that can divide into small groups for deliberation and then bring together the results of the small groups for the whole community to complete discernment. Here are a few ways to do that:

Posting

When a particular proposal is under consideration, small groups engage in prayerful dialogue about it that results in one of three outcomes: (1) Yes to the proposal as originally stated; (2) No to the very purpose of the proposal; or (3) Revision of the proposal as originally stated. Write on newsprint or chalkboard each small group's response to the proposal using these three categories. Revisions also need to have their text written for comparison. Also note if any members disagreed with the majority in each small group. Categorize these results into four areas: (1) unanimous acceptance of the substantive intent of the original proposal or of a revision; (2) unanimous rejection of the substantive intent; (3) different reactions to substantive intent—some accept it, some reject it; and (4) different options in the revisions offered.

Open Forum

If the posting above reveals only minor differences, it may be possible to resolve them through open discussion. Members of various groups are asked to explain to the whole group their reasons for arriving at their conclusion.

Delegation Process

With a large number of small groups, delegates can be selected from each small group, or from clusters of small groups. These delegates then meet to deliberate. When that group completes its deliberation, the delegates return to their original groups or clusters and explain how the conclusions were reached in order to “test the sense of peace” of those results with the original groups. If a sense of peace is not achieved, the delegates take this new information back to the small group of delegates and they continue the process back and forth until consensus

is reached. The delegates may do their deliberation at a separate location and time or in the presence of the whole gathering that listens to and prays for them as they deliberate.

Fish Bowl

Another way to build consensus is the “fish bowl” or concentric circle method. An inner circle of a few persons discusses the question while all the others, seated in an outer circle, listen. Those in the inner circle gradually move to the outer circle and are replaced by persons from the outer circle, until everyone who desires to speak has filtered through the inner circle.

Representatives Speaking Before the Whole Group

One person may be selected to represent each perspective. They engage one another in front of the whole group to seek consensus. Though this may take some time, often it has been found that the whole group has achieved consensus simply by listening to the representatives work through the issue.

¹ John Carroll Futrell, S.J. *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, “Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience,” Vol. IV, November 1972, No. 5, pp. 181–184.



Appendix C

Sample of a Covenant for Communal Discernment by Victoria G. Curtiss

As Christians called to model the body of Christ, we will:

- ▶ Be intentional in developing relationships with one another in order to build and maintain Christian community and foster trust, even when discussion may at times be tense;
- ▶ Rely on prayer, Scripture, listening, and deep engagement with Christ and each other;
- ▶ Act in a spirit of truth and love, honoring the truth that God works through each member of the body;
- ▶ Engage in conversation and ongoing study together in such areas as Scripture, theology, church, vocation, and gifts of the Holy Spirit;
- ▶ Share adequate information with the whole body;
- ▶ Learn about the various perspectives on the topic;
- ▶ Use I-messages to speak openly and transparently regarding one's intentions, concerns, values, and interests;
- ▶ Speak from our personal experiences related to the subject;
- ▶ Listen attentively and with respect and openness to our sisters and brothers, believing that all desire to be faithful to Jesus Christ;
- ▶ Respond after restating what we have heard and asking for any clarification;
- ▶ Focus on ideas instead of questioning people's motives, intelligence, or integrity;
- ▶ Refrain from name calling or using labels;
- ▶ Desist from "calling for the question" in order to remain open to the vision God holds for us all and to find win/win solutions where possible; and
- ▶ Articulate what the largest portion of the body senses is the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Appendix D

Community-Building Tools

Questions

At the beginning of each gathering, strengthen relationships by inviting members to share something of what is going on in their lives in response to a question such as:

- ▶ What are you leaving behind to be here and to what are you returning?
- ▶ What is your full name, and what is the story of your name?
- ▶ What is something new and something good that has happened recently?
- ▶ What is a moment of grace you have recently experienced?
- ▶ Where have you witnessed God at work in your midst lately?
- ▶ What is one joy you have? What is one concern you have? (These can then be incorporated into prayer.)
- ▶ What do you most appreciate about the congregation of which you are a part?
- ▶ When and where were you baptized?
- ▶ Who has significantly influenced your faith or life?
- ▶ What do you like to do in your spare time?
- ▶ What is an unselfish act you have witnessed or done?
- ▶ What pain in the world haunts you or grieves you the most?
- ▶ What do you feel passionate about or drawn to do?

Lectio on Shared Experience¹

Listening for the Gentle Touch of Christ the Word (The Literal Sense)

1. Invite the group members to quiet their bodies and minds—to relax, sit comfortably but alert, close their eyes, and attune to their breathing.
2. Invite each person to review gently events, dynamics, situations, sights, and encounters that have recently happened in the group's life, or in relation to the issue needing to be discerned.

Gently Ruminating, Reflecting (Meditatio—Meditation)

3. Invite each person to focus on one of the events or encounters. Invite the group members to remain in silence and:
 - a) Recollect the setting, sensory details, sequence of events, and other significant aspects.
 - b) Notice where the greatest energy seemed to be evoked. Was there a turning point or shift?
 - c) Reflect on ways God seemed to be present. To what extent were you aware of God's presence then? Now?

Prayerful Consecration, Blessing (Oratio—Prayer)

4. Invite the group members to:
 - a) Use a word or phrase from the Scriptures to consecrate and offer to God in prayer both the event or encounter and their interior reflections.
 - b) Allow God to accept and bless both as a gift.

Accepting Christ's Embrace

5. Invite the group members to remain in silence for some time.

Sharing our *Lectio* Experience with Each Other

6. Call the group back together. Invite the group members to share briefly about their experience or to remain in silence.

¹ Adapted from "Lectio on Life," *Lord, Teach Us To Pray*, The Office of Spiritual Formation of the Presbyterian Church, (U.S.A.), "The Word in Prayer," p. 7.

Appendix E

Prayer of Examen

Individual Prayer of Examen¹

1. Find a quiet spot to sit comfortably where you will be undisturbed. Quiet yourself using a method that works for you, such as attending to the rhythm of your breathing, repeating a simple word or phrase, gazing upon a candle's flame or other visual centering, or listening to meditative music.
2. Reflect upon the events of the past day, as if watching a videotape of your experiences. Do not rush, but take time to remember fully your experiences, including the more subtle aspects of your day. What feelings did you experience? What insights did you have? What sensations were you aware of? What did you notice? What did you enjoy? What frustrated or disappointed you?
3. Ask God to bring to your heart an awareness of one or two moments or experiences for which you are not grateful—experiences of “negative” emotions such as anger or sadness or guilt—times when you felt drained of energy and alienated from your truest self. What made these experiences so difficult? Be present to these less pleasant experiences as fully as you can, yet without judging or being critical, knowing that God was with you then and is with you now. Allow your mind to move again into deeper stillness, resting in God's presence without words or thoughts.
4. Give thanks to God for whatever you have experienced.

Using Examen with Communal Discernment²

- A. Before beginning a discernment process, it can be helpful for individuals to write about “What is it like for me to feel the presence of God—to be aware of God?” That becomes a touchstone for the inner state in which discernment takes place.
- B. Throughout the discernment process, it is helpful for persons to notice any times that they may be blocked from complete openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit. To identify blocks in relation to other participants in the group, persons may ask themselves these questions:
- | | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| ▶ Whom do I dismiss? | ▶ With whom do I disagree instinctively? |
| ▶ Why do I dismiss that person? | ▶ With whom do I agree instinctively? |
| ▶ Who threatens me? | ▶ Whom do I find irritating? |
| ▶ Whom do I threaten? | ▶ Why am I irritated? |

After increasing one's awareness, one then prays, asking God for greater openness.

- C. In relation to the issue at hand, persons may ask themselves:
- ▶ About what aspects of the proposal am I afraid?
 - ▶ Especially if I am not in favor of the proposal: How will the community benefit from this proposal?
 - ▶ Especially if I am in favor of the proposal: What price will the community have to pay for this proposal?
- D. If the group seems to have lost a state of being prayerfully centered, it may be helpful to engage in a few minutes of silence. Another help may be to invite the members to reflect on one or more of the preceding questions by writing their thoughts in a journal.

1 Adapted from *Lord Teach Us to Pray—A Guide to Prayer*, produced by the Office of Spiritual Formation of the Presbyterian Church, (U.S.A.), Section on “Seeking the Will of God,” p. 32.

2 From presentation by Fr. Michael Sheeran, president of Regis University at the conference on Discerning the Leadership of Christ, January 2006.

Appendix F

Biblical and Theological Reflection Including Lectio Divina¹

To be a spiritual community that seeks God's guidance, we need to know how to listen for God's Word together. We need both to study and meditate upon Scripture as we lead the church.

To do this, we weave our story, issue, or concern with God's Master Story. As we consider a need in the church, we reflect together on Scriptures that might speak to this situation. As we do so, we trust the Holy Spirit to guide our thoughts and lead our meditation together.

Here is a simple process that can help us learn how to weave our story with God's story.

Step 1.

Identify a significant issue for consideration.

Step 2.

Look at all the many sides of the issue. Share with each other relevant information regarding this issue.

Step 3.

Discuss how this issue personally affects the members of the group. How does it come close to each member's personal experience?

Step 4.

Ask members of the group to share aloud Scripture passages that might help guide the group as they listen for God's will. Discuss these passages as a group and choose one that the group will reflect upon together.

Step 5.

Read the passage aloud and invite members of the group to speak their responses to the following questions. Comments are simply shared and not discussed. A slight pause is appropriate between each comment so that members may process what has been shared.

- ▮ The first reading is for group members to get a feel for what is happening in this Scripture. Allow a moment of silence for them to consider the context and what is being said before reading the passage for a second time.
- ▮ After the second reading ask, "What one word or phrase leaps out to you from this passage?"
- ▮ After the third reading ask, "What is one way that you see God working in this passage?"
- ▮ After the fourth reading ask, "How does this Scripture speak to our situation?"

Step 6.

Return to the issue at hand. Did this Scripture reflection offer any new insights or wisdom to this situation? How do these insights influence the group's sense of God's leading? Discuss these connections between our situation and God's story.

¹ These principles were compiled by the Reverend John E. Anderson and drawn from the books, *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* by Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, and *Listening Hearts: Discerning God's Call in Community* by Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward.



Appendix G

Mutual Invitation (adapted)

Mutual Invitation was developed by Eric H. F. Law while he worked in various multicultural settings.¹ This tool helps ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak.

This adapted form incorporates a time of silence before the next speaker shares. This is to increase the likelihood that people have taken in what the last person said, give more time for the next one to gather his or her thoughts, and provide a setting more conducive for prayerful reflection. Persons are encouraged to listen for “How is God speaking through this person?”

Mutual Invitation works best in groups with four to ten participants. They should sit in a circle so they can see one another. To estimate time needed for each round of sharing, multiply the number of participants by three to five minutes.

How to Proceed

- ▶ Tell participants how much time is set aside for this process.
- ▶ Introduce the topic to be discussed or question(s) to be explored. If this is not in writing on the wall or on a handout in front of everyone, repeat the question.
- ▶ Introduce the process by explaining the following:

In order to ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak, we will proceed in the following way. After the group sits in silence for a time, the leader or a designated person will share first. After that person has spoken, he or she then invites by name another to share. You do not need to invite the person sitting next to you. Before each person speaks or passes, a short time of silence will be observed. After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege to invite another to share. If you are not ready to share yet, say “I pass for now” and then invite another person to share. You will be invited again later. If you don’t want to say anything at all, simply say “pass” and proceed to invite another to share. We will do this until everyone has been invited.

If someone has already expressed what you would say, please go ahead and say your thoughts in your own words because it helps the group get a sense of everyone’s perspectives.²

Problems to Anticipate

When this is used for the first time with a group, it may be awkward. The tendency is to give up on the process and go back to the “whoever-wants-to-talk-can-talk” form of discussion. However, with persistent use, a group will eventually become familiar with Mutual Invitation and experience its benefits. A good way to ensure the process goes well the first time is to make sure there are a couple of people in the group who have used the process before and have the facilitator invite one of them to speak first. If a person does not remember to invite the next person, do not invite for him or her. Point out that this person has the privilege to invite the next person to speak. This is especially important when a person passes. By ensuring that this person has the privilege to invite, the group affirms and values that person.

1 Eric H. F. Law is an Episcopal priest who wrote *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community*, (Chalice Press, 1993) in which he describes Mutual Invitation.

2 This introduction is adapted from Eric H. F. Law’s ministry, *The Kaleidoscope Institute*. Learn more about the institute at www.ladiocese.org/ki.

Appendix H

Songs

These songs may be sung a second time, changing “my” to “our,” “I” to “we,” and “me” to “us.”

Breathe on Me, Breath of God

Presbyterian Hymnal 316

Breathe on me, Breath of God,
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what Thou dost love,
And do what Thou wouldst do.

Breathe on me, Breath of God,
Until my heart is pure,
Until with Thee I will one will,
To do and to endure.

Open My Eyes

Presbyterian Hymnal 324

Open my eyes, that I may see
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free.

Refrain: Silently now I wait for Thee,
Ready my God, Thy will to see;
Open my eyes (ears), illumine me;
Spirit divine.

Open my ears, that I may hear
Voices of truth Thou sendest clear;
And while the wave notes fall on my ear,
Everything false will disappear.
(repeat refrain)

Spirit of the Living God

by Daniel Iverson

Copyright: © 1935, Renewed 1963 Birdwing Music
(admin. by EMI Christian Music Publishing c/o: Music
Services). All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Spirit of the Living God, Fall afresh on me.
Spirit of the Living God, Fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, Fill me, use me.
Spirit of the Living God, Fall afresh on me.

Guide My Feet

Presbyterian Hymnal 354

Guide my feet while I run this race,
Guide my feet while I run this race,
Guide my feet while I run this race,
For I don't want to run this race in vain! (race in vain!).

Search my heart...

Heleluyan/Alleluia

Presbyterian Hymnal 595

Alleluia, alleluia; alle, alleluia;
Alleluia, alleluia; alle, alleluia.

Heleluyan...

I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use

Presbyterian Hymnal 369

I'm gonna work so (work so) God can use me
anywhere, Lord, anytime!
I'm gonna work so (work so) God can use me
anywhere, Lord, anytime!

I'm gonna pray so...

Take Thou Our Minds, Dear Lord

Presbyterian Hymnal 392

Take Thou our minds, dear Lord,
We humbly pray;
Give us the mind of Christ each passing day;
Teach us to know the truth that sets us free;
Grant us in all our thoughts to honor Thee.

Take Thou ourselves, O Lord,
heart, mind, and will;
Through our surrendered souls Thy plans fulfill.
We yield ourselves to Thee—time, talents, all;
We hear, and henceforth heed, Thy sovereign call.

Except as noted, all songs from *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs*. Copyright 1990, Westminster/John Knox Press. Used by permission.

Appendix I

Forms of Deliberation by Victoria G. Curtiss

DEBATE	DIALOGUE	DISCERNMENT
One side knows “the truth” and seeks to persuade others to join its way of thinking	Understanding or direction emerges through listening to many or all the voices in the group	A community of believers seeks guidance of the Holy Spirit through prayer; reflection on Scripture, tradition, values, and current realities; dialogue; and finding places of agreement
Defends a viewpoint	Suspends judgment	Offers “holy indifference” to all but God’s will
Uses advocacy, persuasion	Balances advocacy with inquiry, explores underlying assumptions, causes, rules	Takes a “long loving look at the real”—contemplation ¹
Uses hard data to get to answers to problems; reasoning is made explicit	Seeks to get to deeper questions and possibly new framing of issues	Uses intellect/reason and affect/intuition: mind and spirit experience
Resolves by defeating or persuading opposing side; or may find synthesis of opposites	Invents unprecedented possibilities and new insights: produces a collective flow	Uncovers a decision rather than makes it: discovers what is most life-giving and loving by listening to wisdom of the Holy Spirit and all voices
Distinguishes and polarizes differences	Looks for what exists between extremes of differences	Seeks to hold polarities in balance
Sees parts, may seek connection among them	Looks for coherence first	Builds on belief that all are part of one body of Christ
Persons identify with positions or stay in fixed roles	Conversation uncovers concerns, needs, fears, hopes, interests	Options are weighed apart from being identified with particular persons
Each side names strengths of its own position and weaknesses of the other	Group members work together to name strengths and weaknesses of options	Each person reflects on the weaknesses and strengths of each option and then shares with the whole group
Either/or choices: binary	Multiple options	May generate multiple options, discover a “third way,” or discern yes or no
Knower’s mind	Learner’s mind	Seeker’s mind

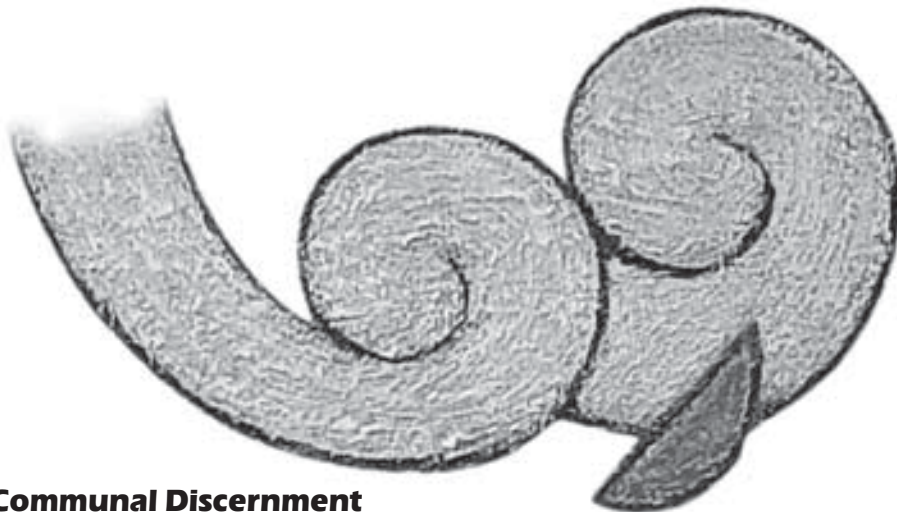
1 This definition of contemplation was articulated by Carmelite William McNamara as quoted in “Contemplation—A Long Loving Look at the Real” by Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., *Church*, Winter, 1989, pp. 14–18. Also, “Without Contemplation the People Perish,” 2005, www.pulpit.org/articles/without_contemplation.asp (8 February 2008).

About the Author

Victoria Curtiss has been a Presbyterian minister since 1980, serving as co-pastor of churches in Cleveland, Ohio; Tucson, Arizona; Ames, Iowa; and Corvallis, Oregon, and as executive in the Presbytery of Western Reserve. She is a certified spiritual director and church consultant in conflict resolution, strategic planning, and communal discernment. Vicky was a member of the General Assembly Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church.

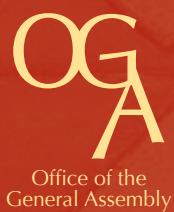
About This Resource

- ▶ These guidelines are to help the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) fulfill the action of the 217th General Assembly (2006), which urged governing bodies “to explore the use of alternative forms of discernment preliminary to decision-making, especially in dealing with potentially divisive issues” (Minutes, 2006, Part I, p. 514). They are intended to aid groups, from the size of small committees to large assemblies, to use processes for decision making that guide listening to the Holy Spirit in a consensus-building manner that is grounded in prayer.
- ▶ The Office of the General Assembly and the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, a ministry of the General Assembly Council, jointly sponsored the production of this resource.
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- ▶ Rob Gorstein did the graphic design for this resource. Mark Koenig served as the editor. Bobbie Montgomery served as the copyeditor.
- ▶ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible and are copyrighted © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and are used by permission.
- ▶ This resource was made possible by your generous gifts to the Peacemaking Offering.



Endnotes

- 1 Lon Fendall, Jan Wood, and Bruce Bishop. *Practicing Discernment Together: Finding God's Way Forward in Decision Making*, Newberg, Oreg.: Barclay Press, 2007, p. 23.
- 2 See Appendix I.
- 3 Frances Taylor Gench. "Testing the Spirits" Bible study on 1 Corinthians 12–14, 25 October 2005, www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity (29 January 2008).
- 4 Paul Anderson. *With Christ in Decision Making: His Present Leadership Among Friends*, A Christian Testimonies Publication, Barclay Press, 1991. For more information see the George Fox University Congregational Discernment Project Web site: www.georgefox.edu/discernment/more_info.html.
- 5 *Book of Order—The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II*, G-1.0100a.
- 6 Ibid., G-1.0307.
- 7 Ibid., G-4.0301d.
- 8 Ibid., G-1.0305.
- 9 See Appendix H.
- 10 See Appendices E and F.
- 11 See Appendix D.
- 12 Adapted from Richard Hunt, Sondra Matthaël, Robert Kohler, and Joaquín García. *Ministry Inquiry Process—Christian As Minister*, Nashville, Tenn.: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 1997. "Model 1. Discernment Steps: Toward a Vision of God's Will," by Bishop David J. Lawson, pp. 194–95; and Paul Anderson. *With Christ in Decision Making: His Present Leadership Among Friends*, A Christian Testimonies Publication, Barclay Press, 1991.
- 13 Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church*, Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997, pp. 78–79.
- 14 See Appendix E.
- 15 See Appendices D and F.
- 16 See Appendix G.
- 17 See "Resources for Fostering Community & Dialogue" available on the web site www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity through the link "Resources," Appendix C.
- 18 Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together*, p. 123.
- 19 John C. Futrell, "Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience" in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* (November, 1972), Vol. 4, No. 5, pp. 179–80.
- 20 Sara Corbin Robert; Henry M. Robert III, William J. Evans, Daniel H. Honemann, Thomas J. Balch. *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 10th edition*. Perseus Publishing Services, 2000, allows for this in Section 14: "Postpone to a Certain Time (or Definitely)." pp. 172–83.
- 21 Consolation and desolation come from discernment as developed by Ignatius of Loyola.
- 22 Robert, op. cit., pp. 524–25.
- 23 Ibid., pp. 155–60.
- 24 From a presentation by Stephen Doughty at the Office of the General Assembly Fall Polity Conference, November 23, 2002. Ignatian spirituality was developed by Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, the order of Jesuits.



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