

## Appendix G

### Sample Discernment Processes

The Commission on Ministry has included several different discernment processes. Each of the ones included has benefits and can be adapted to individual situations. It is the desire of the COM that each person seeking to use a discernment team review each process and determine what type of process fits the situation.

Pay particular attention to the first process described, “Discerning God’s Will Together”. This is taken from the book of the same name, Discerning God’s Will Together by Danny Morris and Charles Olsen. The process outlined may look long and complicated, but it does promote an attitude of discernment and an intentionality of establishing a spiritual discipline of “holy listening”. There are some good suggestions about letting go of outside thoughts and about growing the seeds of what God has sown. It is well worth the time to review and then work this process as a group. Using the “individual discernment questions from Part 1, or questions from other discernment processes with “Discerning God’s Will Together” may be helpful.

It is our hope that as congregations become more proficient with discernment teams, they will contribute their processes and adaptations to the COM in order to be added to this notebook.

### Discernment Processes Included in this Notebook

Discerning God’s Will Together A Spiritual Practice for the Church by Danny Morris and Charles Olsen.

This is published by Alban Publications. The format can be used to guide an individual discernment process as well as a congregational discernment process.

Minnesota Discernment Process.

A process of individual discernment developed by the Diocese of Minnesota. Each session focuses on a specific aspect of call.

Diocese of Colorado – Holy Orders Handbook

A process of individual discernment developed by the Diocese of Colorado. The focus is more on the development of a person’s ministry. There are scripture passages and prayers designated for each of the sessions.

The Quaker Clearness Committee Model

A much more informal process that can be used in addition to another process or in smaller congregations where most people know each other.

Listening Hearts by Suzanne Farnham, Joseph Gill, R. Taylor McLean, Susan Wand

A more informal process. The book has many helpful ideas about discernment groups and the way they might function.

12/05

Section G – 1

# Discerning God's Will Together

## A Guide to Doing Prayerful Discernment

*The first page is an overview of this process. More detail about each stage follows.*

### Selecting the Seed

#### **Framing**

Select a subject or an arena for discernment.

*May we consider this as a matter of discernment, asking, "God is this your will?"*

### Preparing the Soil

#### **Grounding**

*What is the guiding principle?*

#### **Shedding**

Test for indifference

*How many are indifferent to all but God's will?*

#### **Rooting**

*What are the biblical images or texts that come to mind?*

### Cultivating the Plants

#### **Listening**

*What voices do we need to hear?*

*Let us pray in silence, seeking to discern God's will.*

#### **Exploring**

*What are the possible options or paths within the guiding principle?*

#### **Improving**

Now "better up" each option. Make each the best it can be.

### Harvesting the Yield

#### **Weighing** (the options)

List the fruits.

Consolation or desolation

Does the Spirit lure you?

Using biblical imagination

*Are we ready to close? Does this matter need more prayer and reflection?*

#### **Closing**

*May we proceed in the way just stated?*

Check for consensus.

#### **Resting**

Test of the heart.

Consolation? Desolation?

# Discernment Process

## Selecting the Seed

**Framing** - Identify and clarify the question

In order to determine if a subject is a realistic discernment issue, framing is essential

Helps clarify what we should pick up and what we should lay down.

Often in a meeting, a question or problem is no sooner stated than a barrage of remedies begins.

Resting in uncertainty goes against the grain.

Feel pressure of time

Quick solutions demonstrate efficiency

Moving too quickly may cover the difficult question

The question itself does not necessarily tell us what level of response is appropriate.

If we raise and consider questions carefully we may detect an unstated need that may be important to address.

When considered seriously, a question often changes with time and reflection.

It is important to provide opportunity for people first to ask questions that establish the needed information and then allow time to raise questions that get beneath the surface.

Members of a community intent on discernment must be deeply united to Christ – not only to find an answer, but to ask the right question in the first place.

Probing questions engage us in ways that help us to discover things for ourselves.

Good questions can open us up to the creative flow of the Spirit.

Well framed questions can draw entire group into a search for truth that enables its members to develop fuller insights together.

Identifies the focus for discernment of God's will

Clearly stated – agreed upon by group “God, what are you guiding me/us to do?”

Test the sense of the group – “May we consider this as a matter for discernment?”

Need to be able to sense the response of the group (leader).

## Preparing the Soil

### **Grounding** - Gather information and ideas

“What is the guiding principle?”

This sets the boundaries for discernment

This principle becomes definitive

The guiding principle should be specific to the issue and should define the boundaries of what will be discussed and the aim of the discernment effort.

The guiding principle may be confirmed by scripture or from a previously determined mission or vision statement.

The group may struggle to identify the guiding principle.

The leader may want to prepare a tentative guiding principle in order to save time for the larger group.

If there is controversy about which principle should guide discernment, the leader may suggest a more generic guiding principle – such as “God’s will, nothing more, nothing less; nothing else”

### **Shedding** – means to name and then lay aside anything that will deter the person or group from focusing on God’s will as the ultimate value

“What needs to die in me/us in order for God’s gifts and direction to find room in our lives?”

Shedding means to suspend assumptions – doesn’t mean getting rid of them, but naming them for everyone to see.

In discernment, “indifference” is a positive word – means, “I don’t value anything as much as I value knowing and doing God’s will”

“What am I willing to let die to give God room to start something new?”

“What will I lay aside or leave behind so that I will be open to new gifts of grace or new expressions of ministry?”

Indifference is not easy to attain. People may be at different places in this ability.

The process of indifference is not optional for people who want to be serious about discerning God’s will.

12/05

### Section G - 4

The group process of coming to indifference may include openly talking about the issue of giving up personal agendas and coming to indifference for the greater good of knowing the Divine will.

The process may form the group as community.

Test for indifference.

“How many are indifferent to all but God’s will?”

the question is not voted on, but each person should consider this in his or her own mind and heart

It is best if everyone affirms his or her indifference, but if that cannot be done, it is better for the group to know the heart of each person – knowing where each person stands will help the group work through the process

Shedding involves a level of trust – each person will share at what ever level they feel comfortable.

The leader invites shedding in proportion to the issue.

The leader may invite the group to move from understanding themselves as individuals to sensing that they are united on indifference as a community.

“Are we willing to let something die to give God room to start something new?”

“What will we lay aside or leave behind so that we will be open to new gifts of grace or new expressions of ministry?”

### **Rooting**

“What Biblical images or texts come to mind?”

Suggest scripture that relates to the issue for discernment

Images, themes, stories or people in Scripture that make connections with the issue they are considering (don't have to defend the choice)

Go beyond Biblical to Christian tradition and the history of the local congregation – arts and hymns of the Church

Recalling stories from other sources help the group form a corporate memory.

May move into silent prayer.

# Cultivating the Plants

## Listening

Participants should see themselves as colleagues.

Christ speaks to his church in a variety of ways and through a variety of people.

All members respect the views of each member – and even invite views of each member.

“Whose voices do we need to hear?”

Listening is essential in discernment.

- To one another
- To cries of people in need
- To Spirit of God

It may include

- Gathering information
- Conducting interviews with people outside the group
- Listen to voices on the edge as well as those in the center

The leader may include time of silent prayer so the group can listen to inner prompting of God’s spirit.

- Should be focused on discernment issue
- Time devoted to silence should be announced (watch the clock)
- Participants may scatter and return at specified time
- Sitting in silence after prayer may allow more openness to the Holy Spirit
- Be aware of deep, inner feelings
- Feelings of consolation and desolation
  - Be aware of deep feelings, while praying
  - Joy, peace, sense of right, movement toward God (consolation)
  - Distress, ill-at-ease, troubled, concerned, confused (desolation)
  - May experience both, but one will dominate
- Be sensitive to the feelings throughout silence – continue to pray and to listen until sense of discernment has come.
- Invite members to talk about their experience if desired.
- Stay in prayer and silence as long as it takes to discern God’s will.

## Exploring

“What are possible options or paths within the guiding principles?”  
list options on paper

In discernment, nothing is to be hidden or ignored. All suggestions may shed light on the subject.

Identify as many options or alternative paths as possible.

12/05  
G - 6

Section

Goal is to identify all possible directions or alternatives each option may be finally put before the group – determine if it needs to be restated for more clarity.

## Improving

“Now improve each option. Make each option the best it can be.”

May work together on this or spend time in silence before reporting to the group.

Through discernment, God's will is more likely to be found in the most rather than in the least.

The leader tries to pull together what has been improved, prior to the weighing of options and closing.

At this time – the leader...

- Is interested in where the group is at this point in the process

- Listens for direction which the process takes, for points of clarity, or conclusions and leadings and offers them to the group for response

- Refines a statement that discussion may reshape

- “Is anyone uncomfortable with the directions just stated?”

# Harvesting the Yield

## Weighing

This allows the discerning person or group to move toward a preference for the paths or options which have been identified and improved.

“How can we come to a preference for a particular path?”

More human judgment is involved in this step.

While using various means of coming to wisdom – realize that this is Holy Ground – we are trusting the indwelling Spirit to be actively engaged in the process.

Methods that can be used

1. draw a line down the middle of the page and list pros and cons
2. list the fruits that each path would produce
3. “Are any from God’s Spirit?” “Are any rooted in the devil’s work of making sin attractive?” “Do any arise from the drive of human ego?”
4. 5 way test
  - a. is it filled with what is good for all
  - b. is it heavy with the fear of God
  - c. is it genuine in the feelings that underlie it
  - d. is it lightweight because of human show or because of some inward trust toward novelty
  - e. has the burden of vain glory lessened its merit
5. place each path near the heart
  - a. is there consolation – a sense of peace and movement toward God
  - b. is there desolation – a sense of dis-ease and movement away from God
6. practice of silence and solitude, allow Spirit to “lure” you to a particular path
7. guided meditation
  - a. Read John 14:1-3, Jesus offers to go ahead and prepare a “place” for us in God’s “house”. Imagine entering a large mansion-type house, Jesus meets and greets you at the door, How does he greet you? What does he say? He escorts you step by step up a long spiral stairway. At the top, you sit together on a bench in a large, round open hallway that is flooded with natural light from a skylight. Around the hallway are several doors – in fact, the same number of doors as options you are considering in your discernment. When you are ready, Jesus offers to accompany you to each door, then gently opens them one at a time, allowing you to peer into each room. What do you see in each?

8. guided imagery
  - a. Select a symbol – something you could draw or fashion for each option.
  - b. In your imagination, take a trip to a chapel or a beautiful secluded meadow with a reflection pond. Upon arrival, allow colorful appointments to embellish your holy place. Invite a holy and wise person to enter the space and greet this Sage. Receive the Sage’s greeting in return.
  - c. Then, as you sit together, imagine each symbol which you have selected entering the space, interacting with the environment and with each other until they come to rest. Note where and how they rest and in what relationships. Then say good-bye to each symbol. Receive the Sage’s parting words and gestures, and return to the location of your discernment.

Leader needs to be open to the possibility that more time may be needed.  
Test for clarity and direct group accordingly.

Decision is not subject to a vote.

Try to sense the response of the group.

Offer a choice – “I sense we are ready to respond,” or, “I sense you may wish to pray and consider this matter further.”

If the leader senses the group is not ready to proceed, may suggest more time is needed.

Be definite in offering an alternative time for further consideration.

Later in the meeting

Another day

End of the meeting

This should be negotiated by the group and strictly honored.

### **Closing**

This step is no longer in dialogue mode where ideas are explored – opening for wisdom and new sight.

This is closing down on a decision or new direction.

We can’t keep matters up in the air forever.

Steps to follow in bringing closure

1. test for consensus
  - a. "I like the proposition as stated"
  - b. "I am concerned, but will support the proposition"
    - i. this is basic affirmation – means its been discussed thoroughly, person might state it differently, this may not be exactly the statement the person would like, but it is close enough
    - ii. give the group a healthy warning to be careful and thoughtful
    - iii. this is a request to not rush to judgment without due consideration
  - c. "I am uneasy for these reasons, but will stand aside"
  - d. non-consensus "I cannot support the proposition"
    - i. the body has not reached full consensus on the matter
    - ii. at this point, the group may choose to stop the process or give the subject more consideration
    - iii. if efforts to reach consensus fail and the person cannot in good conscious change his or her response, leader may ask the person if he or she feels able to step aside so as not to block the rest of the group. The person's reasons for non support would be recorded
  - e. Seriously divided means
    - i. No consensus
    - ii. There are contrary feelings
    - iii. Group has argumentative attitude about the outcome
  - f. Not ready to conclude means
    - i. More time is needed
      1. for prayer
      2. for information gathering
      3. discussion
  - g. impasse means
    - i. members too far apart to anticipate consensus
2. proceed in the following way
  - a. reconsider guiding principles, test again for indifference, repeat rest of the discernment process
  - b. take time for further prayer and reflection
  - c. cast lots
    - i. when situation offers several good choices and the group doesn't want to vote down a good option and make it a loser
    - ii. the option drawn by lot will be chosen
    - iii. agree to this procedure ahead of the action
  - d. appoint one person to decide for the group
    - i. all must agree to follow the decision of this one person
  - e. vote by majority rule – sting of voting is lessened if everyone feels he or she has been heard

- f. count only “yes” votes
- g. drop it – celebrate the discernment, drop it, and move on

**Resting**

“Is this a comfortable place to be?”

This becomes the final movement in the process.

“Is our decision God’s will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else?”

Resist the temptation to rush forward even when the matter seems properly concluded.

If time permits, invite the group to rest in the decision – how does it sound in the parking lot, after a night’s sleep, when explaining it to a friend?

Put the matter to the test of the heart

Does it bring consolation or desolation? Draw us closer to God and each other or result in distress and move the group away from God?

When finished with a discernment

Review the experience

Make notes on how it went, what you learned about dynamics and principles of discernment and consensus and what you discovered about God’s will.