

Discerning God's Will Together:

Discovering a Process of Leadership Discernment

by Ruth Haley Barton

It was a conversation similar to many I have had with Christian leaders. A pastor from a large church was telling me that his church was going through a major transition as its leaders tried to respond to the growth they were experiencing. They had outgrown their facility (a good problem to have!) so the obvious question was: "Will we add on to our facility or will we start another church?"

But clearly this was only the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the surface larger questions lurked: What should be our emphasis now? Does our mission still capture what we feel called to? Is the leadership structure effective for what is emerging now? Can we keep going this way or will we burn ourselves out, adding a building campaign and more people and activities to our plates?

Sensing the weight that this pastor was carrying, I probed a little deeper and asked, "How are you going about answering these questions? Does your leadership team have a clearly articulated process for discerning God's will in these matters?" A look of disorienting awareness crossed his face as he realized that the answer to the question was no. After recovering a bit, he added "But we always have a time of prayer at the beginning of our meetings."

Understanding Spiritual Leadership

Many of us have a vague idea that there should be something different about our leadership as Christians—particularly if we are leading a church or Christian organization—but the truth is that the difference usually gets reduced to a perfunctory prayer at the beginning of a meeting and sometimes even that gets lost in the shuffle!

What is it, then, that distinguishes spiritual leadership from other kinds of leadership?

The heart of spiritual leadership is discernment: the capacity to recognize and respond to God's will both personally and in community. This is much easier said than done. Discernment requires us to move beyond our reliance on cognition and intellectual hard work to a place of deep listening and response to the Spirit of God within us and among us. It is one thing to rely on what feels like such a subjective approach when it pertains to one's personal life, but it's much riskier when our decisions involve large budgets, other people's financial investments, the lives of multiple staff, reports to high-powered boards, and serving a customer base with its expectations. Is there a trustworthy process for actively seeking God relative to decisions we are making?

The practice of corporate discernment, like any other Christian discipline, is a means of creating space for God's activity in our lives, making ourselves available so that he can

do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. The *spiritual* leader is distinguished by his or her commitment and ability to guide the discernment process so everyone can affirm together a shared sense of God's desire for them and move forward. Through the practice of discernment in community we open ourselves to the wisdom of God that is beyond human wisdom but is available to us when we ask for it. But discernment does not take place in a vacuum nor by accident. We must first cultivate an environment in which discernment can take place and then enter a process that enables us to actively seek God's will in the decision that we face.

Cultivating an Environment for Discernment

Romans 12:1, 2 indicates that the ability to discern the will of God is a natural by-product of spiritual transformation in community. Paul says, "Be not conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, *so that* you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." Therefore, a community that is dedicated to spiritual transformation provides the environment in which discernment takes place. We cultivate this environment as we commit ourselves to spiritual disciplines, personally and together, that enable us to keep offering ourselves to God for the work that only he can do.

Discernment takes place in the community of those who are committed to spiritual transformation.

When the leaders launching the Transforming Center began meeting together, we gathered first on the basis of our desire to experience spiritual transformation in the context of community. This desire led us to establish rhythms of prayer, Scripture reading, self-examination and confession, solitude and silent listening, worship and intercession that called forth our own transformation. It was out of our commitment to *be together* in ways that were spiritually transforming that we began to discern a calling to *do something together*. It is only as we have struggled to stay true to our own process of spiritual transformation that we have continued to discern what our calling is and stay true to it. We continue to discover, sometimes painfully, that when our commitment to basic spiritual disciplines in community slips, we become muddled in our capacity to be truly discerning: rather than acting from a clear sense of God's desire for us we become driven by our own agendas, rather than experiencing God's peace we become frantic, rather than finding clarity we become lost in a swirl of inner and outer chaos.

Entering into the Process of Discernment

As we cultivate an environment in which discernment can take place, we notice that it begins to happen naturally. However, there are also times for decision-making that call for intentionality and focus in actively seeking God's will. During such times the spiritual leader calls people into the spiritual practice of discernment. Discernment as a spiritual practice is not mechanical nor is it always linear. As we become more comfortable with the process we experience it not so much as a step-by-step procedure but as a creative mix of these dynamic elements:

Ask the right question. Not all questions warrant a full discernment process. Some questions, such as choosing a computer system, might be answered with a 15 minute, fact-filled discussion. However, there are other questions that require a different level of attention and prayerfulness from the entire leadership group. Even when we think we know what the question is, there might be a larger question lurking underneath it that holds even greater significance for us.

A church's question about the building project might deepen into a question about mission and values and whether a new building might or might not help us stay true to these. What starts out as a meeting to set strategy gives way to the deeper question of whether we are pushing our own agenda or whether God is really opening up new opportunities. What begins as a question about event scheduling raises a more far-reaching concern about pace of life and whether or not we are working and living together in such a way that we honor true human limitations and create space in our lives for loving God and others. Thus, discernment begins with listening for the deeper question.

Involve the right people. It is amazing how we can become so stuck in organizational "silos" that we overlook those who might have important contributions to make to the discernment process. In addition to the obvious (the board, the staff, the management team) we might consider: Who else has gifts of wisdom and discernment that we value? Who has information and experience that might help us? Who has influence that might be able to help us communicate the outcomes of our process to others in an inviting way to the larger community when the time comes?

Establish guiding values and principles. Discernment with others at the leadership level requires an extraordinary amount of safety in each other's presence along with great clarity about what values govern the process. For the Transforming Center, there are certain values that we have agreed together we will not violate for any reason no matter how expedient it might seem. One of these values is our commitment to trustworthy relationships in community. We have agreed that learning to come together and stay together in unity is our first and most enduring task as we pattern our relationships after Christ's commitment to his own disciples. We do not just assume these things; we talk about them and seek to live into them with great vigor and intent. This means that we are also committed to telling the truth. Beyond the kind of maneuvering and posturing that often takes place in leadership settings, we believe God works through *all* truth—even truth that seems like it might slow us down or complicate matters or take us into uncharted territory—to bring forth the gift of discernment. Even when the truth is hard, we take great pains to affirm the courage that it takes for each one of us to bring the truth that God has given us to the discernment process. When any one of us has deep reservations or resistance to a particular direction or decision, we trust the Spirit of God in that person and wait for deeper understanding and unity. We have never regretted the decision to honor each other in this way. In fact, God has often used this principle to save us from ourselves! Over time we have come to understand that when we compromise basic values for any reason we have compromised our essence and then we do not have much that is of value to offer others.

Pray without ceasing. Discernment requires much more than a perfunctory prayer at the beginning of a meeting. In fact, it involves several kinds of praying throughout the entire process. When the question for discernment has been clarified, the community for discernment assembled, and guiding principles have been established, we can begin with a prayer of quiet trust like the one found in Psalm 131 in which the Psalmist acknowledges his utter dependence upon God in the face of matters “too great and too marvelous for me.” A different kind of spirit descends upon us when we enter into decision-making from this stance. When we sense that the process is getting out of hand, that human dynamics are distracting us from real issues, that we are stuck, that we are applying nothing more than human effort to the decision at hand, it can be very helpful for the leader to call the group back to this prayer of quiet trust along with a little time for silence. This gives us the opportunity to shift back into a position of trust rather than human striving.

We need to also pray for indifference. This is not the kind of indifference that we associate with apathy; rather, it is the prayer that we would be indifferent to everything but the will of God. This can be a very challenging prayer for us to pray because oftentimes we enter into decision-making with strong opinions and more than a little self-interest. Indifference in the discernment process means that I am indifferent to matters of ego, prestige, organizational politics, personal advantage, personal comfort or favor, or even my own pet project. “God’s will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.” This takes time, for there is often a death to self that is required before we can see God’s will taking shape in our lives. But it is well-spent, because otherwise the discernment process becomes little more than a rigged election!

When we have reached a point of indifference, we are finally ready to pray for wisdom which God promises to bestow on us generously when we ask. The prayer for indifference is an important pre-requisite to the prayer for wisdom because the wisdom of God is often foolish to man; indifference to matters of our own ego, in particular, prepares us to receive this gift.

Listen. At the heart of the discernment process is the choice and the ability to listen on many levels. First of all we must listen deeply to the experience (s) that caused us to be asking this question in the first place. When the New Testament believers were faced with the question of whether or not Gentiles should be required to be circumcised in order to be saved, they entered into a time of deep listening: to the conversion experience of the Gentiles, to the perspectives of the people who were with them, to the questions and debate of the Pharisees, to Peter’s sense of personal calling to the Gentiles, to Paul and Barnabas’ descriptions of signs and wonders, to James’ exposition of Scripture connecting this experience to the words of the prophets in the Old Testament. Finally, out of all that listening James dared to state what he felt God was saying in it all: that they would not impose any further burden on the Gentiles beyond the essentials of the faith. The listening process had been so thorough that when James summarized it so succinctly, it was clear to everyone that the wisdom of God had been given.

This story illustrates that the discernment process involves a major commitment to listening with love and attention to our experiences, to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit deep within ourselves and others, to Scripture and Christian tradition, to pertinent facts and information, to those who will be affected most deeply by our decisions, to that place in us where God's spirit witnesses with our spirit about those things that are true. When we embark on a true discernment process, we ask: What voices do we need to hear and how do we make sure that we hear them?

Select an option that seems consistent with what God is doing among you.

Discernment does not always come with as much clarity as it did for the New Testament church. When it's not clear, you might select an option or two, seek to improve upon those options so that they are the best they can possibly be and then weigh them out to see which one seems most consistent with what God is doing among you. Questions that help us to weigh out these alternatives are: What is the thing that God is making natural and easy? What brings a sense of lightness and peace even in the midst of challenge? Is there an option that enables us to do something before we do everything?

Seek inner confirmation. Sometimes in the excitement of a meeting we can get somewhat carried away by what is happening in the moment. We might need to allow people some time apart from the group to become quiet in God's presence, to pray and think, and to notice whether they are at peace with the decisions being made. It is good to take a break (a few minutes, an hour, a day, or even a week) and come back together and check in with each other to see what God is saying to them in their quiet listening. If people are experiencing deep, inner peace with the options you are exploring, then affirm that together. If anyone is still having reservations or experiencing questions or resistance, honor them by listening to what it is they are experiencing and see what God has to say to you in it. Perhaps one element of a particular option that needs to be tweaked or perhaps a larger adjustment needs to be made. Trust God to work through this person's hesitation.

Agree together. Once the leadership group has thoroughly explored the different options, hopefully there is a clarity that emerges which points towards one of the options or some combination of the options as particularly graced by God with wisdom and truth. This is the time when those responsible for providing leadership look at each other and say, "To the best of our ability, we agree that this particular path is God's will for us so this is the direction we will go." Then we rest in God, thanking him for his presence with us and for the gift of discernment as it has been given.

Now it's time to move forward into planning and implementation, confident, that "the one who has called you will be faithful to bring it to pass."

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