

Discerning the will of God can be time consuming. Take for example the church's experience of trying to decide which books should constitute its sacred writings. In the year 144, Marcion, a Christian leader from Asia Minor, proposed that the authoritative writings of the church should consist of the Gospel of Luke and the writings of Paul. Because Marcion had a profound dislike for Judaism, he set aside the Hebrew scriptures altogether.

Most churches found Marcion's canon grossly inadequate. For them, there was no question that the Hebrew scriptures had to be part of the Christian canon, but it was less clear which other writings should have authoritative standing. As late as the third century there were lingering questions over the status of Hebrews, James, the letters of Peter and John, and the book of Revelation. In some communities it was still unclear what the church should

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do with writings such as the Didache, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Epistle of Barnabas. It was not until the late fourth century that standardized lists of New Testament writings emerged with the final twenty-seven books as we know them. Evidently the process of discernment on the matter of what constituted scripture was a long and arduous process.

By comparison, many issues facing the church in the present day come and go much more quickly. For example, Mennonite churches in North America have been addressing questions around homosexuality for only about thirty years. And yet for many people it is time to move on. Some voices suggest that the discernment process has gone on far too long because, as they see it, the Bible is clear in forbidding all homosexual activity. For

others, there is a strong desire to move on because the topic has become a nonissue. In their view, the church should be welcoming and ought now to turn its attention to more pressing issues such as helping refugees, feeding the hungry, and bearing witness to Christ's saving love.

Wherever we find ourselves on this question, the stakes seem high as some congregations and even area conferences are splitting over this issue and are going their own way or forming new like-minded networks and associations. Mennonites are not alone in this experience. Many denominations have gone through painful divisions over whether to welcome gays and lesbians, and it is likely that for the foreseeable future the issue will continue to divide.

In this issue of *Vision* the writers do not attempt to resolve the various questions facing the church in matters pertaining to homosexuality. Some writers hardly address the topic at all. Far more they are asking us to pay attention to *how* we discern and how we live faithfully in times when we disagree with one another: *how* we discern is as important as the conclusions we ultimately reach.

A number of themes emerge in the articles in this issue.

Various writers speak of the virtue of patience, the imperative to

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be humble and not claim a total perspective, and the importance of not excluding any voices in the conversation. A common thread running through several of the articles is the importance of our experience, the lived witness of faith, along with a heightened awareness of the ongoing work of the Spirit of God in changing circumstances and various situations.

The sense here is that even as we diligently attend to scripture, we should not equate the process of discernment with biblical exegesis. Genuine discernment presupposes a living faith in a relational God

who has conveyed his will ultimately not in textual propositions—but in the flesh! As many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Anabaptists would have it, it is not the encounter solely with the

Written Word but rather the embrace of the Living Word that ultimately saves, transforms, and breathes life.

Decades ago the church was struggling with another issue—whether women could assume leadership positions in the church. The discerning process at that time included careful biblical interpretation, but just as important was the church's consideration of lived experience and attentiveness to the leading of the Spirit of God. Such thoughtful attention to the living witness of the faith and the Spirit's breath must be at the heart of any discernment process and must surely accompany us as we journey ahead.

About the editor

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