

# Spiritual discernment in the congregation

Angela Reed

**S**ome years ago, I visited several churches to talk with leaders and lay people about how they offer spiritual guidance to one another in the faith community. The practices of Covenant Presbyterian Church caught my attention in a particular way.<sup>1</sup> Covenant's members seemed to have a common language for personal and corporate discernment and were actively engaged in listening for God.

Everyone I spoke with had something to say about seeking God's calling in everyday life. I met a business executive who silently prays his way through corporate board meetings, a group of elderly women who intercede for seminary students and needy families while knitting prayer shawls for them, and lay leaders who emphasize spiritual discernment and communal consensus in decision making about church projects and challenging congregational issues.

**Spiritual discernment is rooted in the relationships we share with God and one another. It includes informal and formal processes of prayerfully seeking God's guidance and watching for God's presence and activity.**

I came to understand something about the development of Covenant's culture of spiritual discernment after participating in worship and interviewing Andrew, the senior pastor. He strives to teach about and model discernment by incorporating the language of "calling" in many facets of congregational life. He continually urges church members to set aside what they *want* to do or even what they

feel they *should* do in any given circumstance, and instead focus on what they sense God is *calling* them to do.

This theology of divine-human interaction is exhibited in the congregation in a myriad of practical ways. For example, during church board meetings, participants are encouraged to discuss important issues together and then pause for silent prayer. As

members emerge from the silence, they seek to make decisions in a way that reflects their understanding of discernment, using language quite different from that of Robert's Rules of Order. Following the prayer time, participants are invited to raise a hand if they believe a proposal is "the will of God for this congregation." These ideas about divine calling are built into the very foundation of communal interaction and are reinforced by ongoing teaching, preaching, and conversation on the theology and practice of discernment. Over time, this theology and practice has become a part of the congregation's cultural ethos.

### **Understanding spiritual discernment**

The term *spiritual discernment* seems a bit ambiguous in a cultural context enamored of the language of spirituality. In her book *Pursuing God's Will Together*, Ruth Haley Barton notes that discernment in the Christian life involves seeking to know and do the will of God. At the most basic level, it is the ability to "recognize and respond to the presence and the activity of God—both in the ordinary moments and in the larger decisions of life."<sup>2</sup> Spiritual discernment is necessarily rooted in the relationships we share with God and one another, especially relationships in the church. It includes informal and formal processes of prayerfully seeking God's guidance and watching for God's presence and activity in the life and ministries of the congregation. Spiritual discernment goes beyond public worship and prayer meetings; it can and should occur both during casual conversations about everyday life on church parking lots and during congregational meetings involving foundational decisions and commitments.

### **The challenge of discerning together**

Those of us who have participated in congregational life for any length of time know that practicing spiritual discernment together is not a neat and tidy process. Church members who are shaped by the norms of a culture that values personal autonomy may resist the language and practices of communal discernment. An emphasis on personal autonomy may lead to a belief that discernment in the spiritual life is essentially an independent pursuit. Sociologist Nancy Ammerman suggests that the "solitary, contemplating person" has become the icon of spirituality in America.<sup>3</sup>

This kind of autonomous spirituality extends to the content of our prayers. In his book *Hearing God*, Dallas Willard expresses a concern that many believers seek God's will primarily for their own lives, focusing on comfort, safety, and righteousness for themselves and their loved ones. Willard argues that this approach is bound to fail. God cannot build life-giving communication on a foundation that is centered only in the self.<sup>4</sup> Shaping a

**Shaping a congregational culture that encourages seeking God's will together for the sake of others and the world beyond us requires us to be intentional about our theology and practice.**

congregational culture that encourages seeking God's will together for the sake of others and the world beyond ourselves will require us to be intentional about our theology and practice. For this we turn to the wisdom of scripture.

### **Discernment on the road to Emmaus**

As the New Testament witness unfolds, we are alerted to something new coming in the way that God chooses to reveal himself to

human beings. God breaks into human history in an unprecedented manner through Emmanuel who is literally God-with-us. Through the teachings of Jesus and his interactions with those he mentored, we learn a great deal about communal discernment. Over the course of their years together, Jesus models a commitment to seeking the Father's will, and he teaches his followers to pray together and support one another in their search for God. One of the most remarkable snapshots of communal discernment in the biblical record is found in the story of two followers of Jesus making their way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35).<sup>5</sup>

**Jesus models spiritual companionship.** In the narrative of Jesus's postresurrection encounter with two disciples on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, Jesus models spiritual companionship in an unexpected way. These two Jesus followers are walking along and reflecting on the heartbreaking experiences of the past several days when another traveler joins them on the road. Somehow they are unable to recognize him, and he does not enlighten them. In the very next story in Luke's Gospel, Jesus manages the encounter differently. He reveals himself immediately, reassuring the disciples that he is alive. Why does Jesus not rush in to fix the pain of these disciples on the road? Why not relieve their suffering?

Somehow Jesus discerns that another approach is necessary. Rather than offer quick answers, Jesus lets them feel their sorrow. Instead of offering immediate revelation, Jesus simply asks them what they are talking about. He is patient as they speak at length, describing their experiences. Jesus has just brought to completion the most notable, world-changing task in human history, but he holds his news back to give them time for reflection. As a spiritual companion, Jesus is a master at listening well before explaining the truth, not only to these disciples on the road, but also to the woman at the well, the rich young ruler, and many others.

Church leaders can serve their congregations best when they provide spiritual guidance in matters of discernment by putting aside their own inner need to be effective helpers and letting go of

**Church leaders serve their congregations best when they provide spiritual guidance in matters of discernment by putting aside their own inner need to be effective helpers and letting go of the urgency to fix a painful problem or resolve a conflict.**

the urgency to fix a painful problem or resolve a conflict quickly. Instead they walk alongside others, listening patiently and allowing them to explore their pain. Leaders attend to the presence and activity of God in congregations when they take up the mantle of spiritual companionship, modeling the importance of accompanying others in matters of discernment by listening with compassion. The minister is a spiritual companion to individuals and to the congregation as a whole.

*Jesus urges a reframing of the disciples' interpretation of events.* A second look at the Emmaus Road encounter reveals that

Jesus is not always patient with his followers. He calls these disciples “foolish” and “slow of heart” in their understanding of events. These are not words we would normally want to use in responding to those who are grieving a major loss. Perhaps this is a moment when the resurrected Christ, who has full knowledge of the universe, may handle the circumstances differently than we would. But if we look beyond the surprising response, we see that Jesus is holding his followers accountable for what they already ought to know, trying to wake them up from a spiritual stupor. He is urging them to see God’s purposes in this situation by reframing their interpretation of events. Their viewpoint is based on life in

first-century Israel under Roman rule. It appears to them now that Jesus will not bring the kind of freedom they had expected. What they hoped would be God's plan is not coming to pass.

Both individuals and congregations face major disappointments at various points in their journeys. Hopes and dreams that appeared to be divinely inspired do not come to fruition. Jesus responds to the disciples' disappointments by stretching their skills for discernment and urging them to broaden their horizons. He

**Jesus listens to these traveling disciples first, and then he helps them discern how God is still at work in what might appear to be a hopeless situation. This kind of discernment is still desperately needed in our communities of faith.**

begins with scripture, the primary source of interpretive authority. Jesus listens to these traveling disciples first, and then he helps them discern how God is still at work in what might appear to be a hopeless situation. This kind of discernment is still desperately needed in our communities of faith today.

*God's presence is recognized through symbolic act and inner response.* Another component of discernment in the narrative involves the recognition of God's presence through a symbolic act and an internal response. When the disciples invite Jesus to

stay, he engages in a symbolic act born out of the natural practice of eating together, something he has done with them countless times. He breaks the bread, blesses it, and passes it to them. In that moment, they recognize him. After Jesus disappears, the disciples do the important work of checking their own internal responses to the encounter. They describe how their hearts burned within, a kind of passion that many believers over the centuries have understood as one way of confirming God's guidance. When we examine ourselves honestly, our gut responses and emotional reactions can help us identify divine invitations. Coupled with the symbolic act, their inner responses give the disciples confidence that they have indeed encountered God, and they have a new understanding of his purposes for the present and future.

Symbolic acts can remind us to focus on God's presence and activity in our lives. Most congregations welcome symbols as reminders of God's action in our behalf. Certainly the bread and cup serve us in this way. Some monastic communities and con-

temporary congregations ring bells to call people to prayer or worship. Visual symbols may also serve as important reminders of God's presence. This has been true in several spiritual direction groups I have led over the years. Occasionally, I pull an empty chair into the circle as a reminder that God is with us, and we can listen for him. One group member brought a miniature chair to a meeting as a gift for another member who was starting a new job. The tiny chair was chosen for her desktop, to help her attend to God's communication even in the busy tasks of daily life.

***Communal storytelling confirms discernment.*** A final insight about discernment in the Emmaus narrative is the role of communal storytelling. After Jesus disappears, the disciples turn to each other to talk about what has just happened. They need each other to confirm that they have indeed encountered the risen Christ and correctly discerned his message to them. Each of them looks first to the other for confirmation, and then they hurry to tell others about the encounter. Many centuries later, this story continues to witness to God's self-revelation in human community.

Telling our own stories about how we have interpreted God's presence and activity in our lives is invaluable for creating a culture of spiritual discernment in congregations. This storytelling might occur in gatherings of any size and nearly any purpose. Retelling our stories of God's faithfulness helps us begin to interpret God's presence in current circumstances. When we reflect on events in light of our theology and confirm together what we sense the Holy Spirit communicating, we take significant strides toward faithful discernment.

As we leave this story, we may wonder why Jesus would meet up with these two followers in this particular way. Why not spend precious time with a larger group of gathered disciples? We could speculate at length, but perhaps the answer is relatively simple. Jesus loves these two disciples, and he wants to be their companion in exploring and discovering the purposes of God. By walking alongside them, he is teaching them to understand his ways and recognize his call. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, God continues to draw us into intimate relationship with himself and urges us to share in discerning relationships with one another, just as he did with the disciples on the road.

## **Practical guidelines for discernment in congregations**

Much more can be learned about congregational discernment from scripture. It is also worth noting that historical church practices and traditions have much to offer us. These include John Wesley's guidelines for small groups (bands and class meetings) and the Quaker practice of calling together a clearness committee. We turn now to practical suggestions emerging from historical practices and contemporary congregations such as Covenant Presbyterian Church.

*First, congregational leaders can embrace the role of minister as spiritual guide to the community.* This guidance may involve the process of patient listening after the model of Christ in pastoral care, administration, small groups, and other relational tasks. Ministers can take the initiative to teach and preach about discernment, provide opportunities for storytelling in worship, and offer classes on prayer and discernment for all ages. This spiritual guidance may also entail asking discerning questions with individuals, in small groups or committees, and in the larger congregation: Have we sensed God's presence and activity among us in the past week, month, year, or years? If so, how? What do we most desire from God? What may God be calling us to be or to do? Is there a particular biblical passage or story from church history that speaks to our current circumstances? How is God calling us to grow in character? In the fruit of the Spirit? In our relationships with one another? How is God calling us to share his love and grace with those beyond our doors in the coming month or year?

*Second, congregations can foster a culture of spiritual discernment.* This process may begin with the development of intentional peer relationships of spiritual companionship and guidance. Participants ask one another the kinds of questions listed above, and they listen and respond prayerfully. They resist the temptation to focus primarily on giving advice or comparing what they hear to their own life experiences. Skills in discernment are learned over time as we practice, practice, practice. Effective discernment depends on individual journeys of spiritual formation, honest self-reflection, and growth in maturity toward the image of Christ.

*Third, there are seasons in every congregation's life when difficult, potentially divisive decisions must be made. When such*

**times come, it may be helpful to engage in a slow, reflective process that involves the whole congregation.** Staff members and lay leaders ought to be involved early in the process, giving time for significant prayer and reflection in their gatherings. Leaders should recognize that discerning God's will for a congregation includes multiple sources of authority. The well-known Wesleyan quadrilateral incorporates scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Congregational members will draw on all of these to varying degrees, sometimes without fully realizing it.

The structure of discernment meetings is important. Congregations can incorporate worship, scripture readings, silence, small group reflection including the recording of notes, and the kinds of questions listed above. It may be helpful to begin with meetings for reflection, storytelling, and discernment, and then hold a later gathering with the hope of coming to a consensus.<sup>6</sup> In every circumstance, the affirmation of mutual trust and shared relationships must be emphasized. God has designed us to know him in and through loving community. We can develop an ethos of discernment in congregations when our practices are founded on these theological convictions.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed to protect privacy.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 10.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 45. While Ammerman's research was limited to the United States, her theory likely applies to other Western countries as well.

<sup>4</sup> Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 28.

<sup>5</sup> This biblical narrative is explored further in *Spiritual Companionship: A Guide to Protestant Theology and Practice*, by Angela H. Reed, Richard R. Osmer, and Marcus G. Smucker (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 109–13.

<sup>6</sup> Barton's book, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, offers valuable insights for leaders who are designing gatherings for discernment.

## About the author

Angela Reed is assistant professor of practical theology and director of spiritual formation at Baylor University's Truett Seminary in Waco, Texas. She is the author of *Quest for Spiritual Community: Reclaiming Spiritual Guidance for Contemporary Congregations* and co-author of *Spiritual Companionship: A Guide to Protestant Theology and Practice*. Reed is an alumna of Canadian Mennonite University and served on the pastoral staff of Sargent Avenue Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba.