

# Holding together individual experience and communal wisdom

Kathy McCamis

**D**iscernment is a practice through which Christians affirm that God is present among God's people and that all that we do matters to God. At its best, discernment draws the community of faith closer to one another and to God as we come together as one body to seek the presence of the Spirit in the midst of our daily lives. At its worst, though, discernment can exclude and draw lines that divide instead of embrace.

## An emerging personal sense of call

It took me a long time to acknowledge that God might be calling me to pastoral ministry. One of the pivotal moments along the way in that journey came the first time I preached a sermon.

**Experiences of being most fully the person God created me to be as I was preaching, leading worship, and offering pastoral care accumulated until I couldn't ignore the sense that God was inviting me to explore a calling to ministry.**

Before I finally accepted the invitation, my pastor had been suggesting for some time that I try preaching. I didn't see myself as a public speaker; in fact, all my life, from elementary school through university, teachers had been remarking on the fact that I seldom spoke up in class. During the first presentation I had to make when I was in junior high, I was so slack-jawed that the gum I had been chewing rolled right out of my mouth and onto the floor. If there was ever an unlikely preacher, it was me.

To my shock, that Sunday after the worship service was complete and I had returned home, I found myself wrestling with one persistent question: What if I am never given another opportunity to do this again? To my utter surprise, something within me had come fully alive that day as I stood before the congregation. As time went on, I experienced a similar sense of being most fully the person

God created me to be in moments when I was sitting with a young person, listening to her and praying with her, inviting her to catch a glimpse of her story being held within God's larger story. I recognized the same sensation again while I was preparing to lead people in prayer and worship.

Eventually, experiences such as these accumulated until I couldn't ignore any longer the sense that God was inviting me to explore this calling. I left my safe career in health care behind to study youth ministry at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg. Although the move seemed risky at the time, those two years of study affirmed my calling and made me more aware of my gifts. I left with a growing sense of who God was, and of the kind of person God was inviting me to become. I left with a growing feeling that God's call was a gift that I wanted to embrace.

### **Denominational discernment about women in ministry**

Around the time of my graduation, the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, of which I am a member, had been wrestling once again with the question of women in ministry leadership. At issue was whether churches would be free to call women to any level of leadership within the church, up to and including that of lead pastor. This question had already been the subject of much debate among Canadian Mennonite Brethren for several decades. Then, in 2006, a resolution was passed officially declaring the issue of whether women could serve as lead pastors to be "non-confessional," which meant that local congregations had freedom to appoint women to any role including that of lead pastor, as they saw fit.

Of course, the issue of women in ministry leadership, as it had become known among Canadian Mennonite Brethren, didn't disappear when the resolution was passed. I quickly discovered that firsthand, as I began to apply for jobs in local Mennonite Brethren congregations. After applying to one congregation, I received an e-mail message from a friend's sister: "I would love for my daughter to have a youth pastor like you someday. I wish my congregation was ready to consider having women in pastoral roles." Another time, my pastor told me about a congregation that had called him to ask whether he knew of any potential

candidates for their vacant youth pastor position: “I immediately thought of you, but they specifically told me that they are only looking for male applicants.”

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The hardest part of the whole experience for me was realizing that in many ways I had been reduced to an issue. My personhood was reduced to my gender. The rest of my story, my gifts, and my skills no longer mattered. All that many of those search committees needed to know was that I was a woman; that alone told them all they wanted to know about me. The gift of God’s call and the process of discernment that I had worked through in coming to accept that gift were all but lost in the midst of theological debates

about whether scripture indicates that a woman could or should possess such a gift.

### **Holding lived experience and collective wisdom together**

The traditional wisdom of the church about the practice of discerning which individuals are being called to pastoral ministry or to missionary service has long insisted that there are two essential components to a call to ministry. One is the internal call sensed by the individual—that inward desire or sense of longing experienced by the person being called. The second is the confirmation of that call by the faith community, by those who have witnessed the person’s gifts for ministry and who affirm that giftedness. Discernment must take seriously both the lived experience of the individual and the collective wisdom of the community of faith. It is incomplete unless it takes both of these perspectives into account.

This understanding of how a call to ministry ought to be discerned is consistent with the insistence of practical theologians that a proper understanding of the church and of the Christian faith must take into account not only the articulated convictions of the church as they are communicated by statements of faith or conference resolutions or other means, but also those convictions that are carried in the lived actions of the faith community. The practices of the church—practices such as baptism, communion,

prayer, keeping Sabbath, and discernment—are themselves theological. Practical theologians remind the church that lived experience bears a wisdom that must be attended to and given a place alongside the theological resources that arise from biblical study, church tradition, and other attempts to articulate statements of belief. As Alister E. McGrath writes, “Christian theology is seen at its best and at its most authentic when it engages and informs the life of the Christian community on the one hand, and is in turn engaged and informed by that life on the other.”<sup>1</sup>

Too often, however, our collective discernment at the church and denominational levels loses sight of the importance of holding both lived experience and collective wisdom together. We reduce

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complicated conversations about the challenges of following Christ in our contemporary context to issues that we hope to resolve by agreeing on a correct interpretation of the wisdom offered by the Bible. In doing so, we disregard the idea that at the heart of the Christian faith lies discipleship, the modeling of one’s life after the life of Jesus Christ in a particular time and place, and we neglect the theological wisdom that develops precisely in the midst of our efforts to follow Jesus in

particular ways in our unique circumstances. This explains how, for many years, the issue of women in ministry leadership in the Mennonite Brethren church could be debated primarily by men, seemingly without recognition that the stories of the women who were sensing God’s call to serve in pastoral ministry might be vital pieces to consider in the discernment of God’s leading in whether to open church leadership positions at all levels to women as well as men.

Frank Rogers Jr. writes that discernment as a Christian practice is rooted in the conviction that “our decisions and our search for guidance take place in the active presence of a God who intimately cares about our life situations and who invites us to participate in the divine activities of healing and transformation.”<sup>2</sup> Rogers further writes, “Discernment is the intentional practice by which a community or an individual seeks, recognizes, and intentionally takes part in the activity of God in concrete situations.”<sup>3</sup>

The practice of discernment therefore has everything to do with identifying the work of God's Spirit in particular situations of particular people in particular times and places. It has everything to do with prayerfully seeking God's presence and activity in the lives of people who are trying to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Christian discernment requires that we affirm, first and foremost, that God is present and active in the midst of our everyday lives.

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in the midst of the unique situations in which they find themselves? If discerning those who are being called to ministry requires paying attention not only to the collective discernment of the body of Christ but also to the inner experience of the one being called, then shouldn't our conversations about end-of-life care seek to draw especially on the wisdom found in the experiences of the man who is trying to live out his Christian faith while also facing terminal illness? Likewise, are there those whose voices are being unintentionally left out of the conversations in our churches about human sexuality? How might we listen to one another, affirming God's love for his

people while also seeking God's transformation and healing that is making all things new?

Certainly, Christian discernment is a corporate activity that requires the participation of the full body of Christ. We affirm with scripture that "there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4–6, NRSV). We are one body with many members. The activity of the Spirit among us is best discerned in the midst of the body of Christ. Just as the authentication of a call to ministry requires the affirmation of the call by the faith community, we also depend on the other members of the body of Christ to help us discern the activity of the Spirit when it

comes to innumerable other questions requiring discernment. Neither the voice of practice nor the voice of theological wisdom alone tells the whole story, but when the two voices intersect, they do so with powerful effect.

When it is being practiced with excellence, Christian discernment brings together the experiences of the one and the wisdom

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of the many, the hard-fought wisdom of the trenches and the carefully worded conclusions of our best theological statements. It creates space in the conversation for all of God's people, affirms God's concern for all things, and reminds us that all that we say and do happens in the presence of God. Rather than reducing people to issues, it seeks to embrace the theological wisdom that is forged as people embrace Christ's call to discipleship, each in the unique situations in which they find themselves. The practice of discernment is an invitation to seek out the activity of the

Spirit among God's people and to join in God's activity in the world, as we await the day when all things will be made new.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alister E. McGrath, "The Cultivation of Theological Vision: Theological Attentiveness and the Practice of Ministry," in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 107.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Rogers Jr., "Discernment," in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 106.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

## About the author

Kathy McCamis is community pastor at House Blend Ministries, an intentional community in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She recently graduated with an MA in theological studies from Canadian Mennonite University and Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary Canada.