

# Cultivating a congregational climate of discernment

Marlene Kropf

**L**ast summer I visited an extraordinary garden in Cornwall. Once a dazzling showpiece, the Lost Gardens of Heligan had been abandoned for nearly a century, lying hidden under an overgrowth of brambles and ivy. When an heir eventually returned to the property, he discovered that many of the original plantings still survived under the debris. With the help of a host of volunteers, the gardens were rescued from oblivion and restored to their original glory.

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Today more than 200 acres of carefully tended gardens and wild areas are open to the public: walled perennial flower gardens, productive vegetable plots, a sunken garden, an Italian garden, herb gardens, and trees and shrubs collected from around the world.

When visitors arrive at the garden, they are given a map and a small, inexpensive compass to guide them. Without this equipment, it would be easy to get lost in such a vast array of gardens. I discovered, however, that one more thing was necessary to successfully find my way around the garden. I needed to stand still in order for the tiny compass to give accurate directions. When I became completely still, the compass would point toward north, and I could consult my map and find my way again.

## Contrasting images of discernment

Sometimes the church thinks of discernment as a mechanical exercise. If we have a correct understanding of scripture and an organized process for making decisions, we believe we will find God's will quickly and easily. Perhaps we imagine the spiritual practice of discernment to be like operating a GPS (global posi-

tioning system) device. We plug in an address—and off we go! A recorded voice and a map will tell us exactly where to turn in order to reach our destination.

But it's not so simple. The spiritual practice of discernment depends on a relationship with God. It requires a capacity to listen—to God, to ourselves, to the faith community, and to the world around us. Such listening demands space and silence. Finding true north in the spiritual world is more like pausing to use a compass than like making an electronic transaction. It means turning away from distracting clutter, waiting long enough to get our bearings, and then giving our full attention to God's guiding presence in the midst of our communities and our world.

Discernment is where prayer meets action. As such, it is a complex spiritual practice required for everyday discipleship. When we are baptized, we commit ourselves to the baptismal life, to know and follow Christ as disciples; to be in relationship with Christ's body, the church; and to participate in God's mission in

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the world. In order to come to maturity in faith, both individual Christians and faith communities need to be able to discern God's call and respond in loving obedience.

### **Tools for discernment**

What this means is that a primary spiritual formation agenda for the church is the development of a capacity and tools for discernment in individuals and in congregations. In response to a neglect of personal formation in the church, we have tended in recent years to emphasize the spiritual formation of individuals through retreats, teaching, and spiritual

direction. While this emphasis has been a necessary corrective, it is not all that is needed. We must remember what the church has understood through the centuries, that we are formed first through our communities. Consequently, the most effective way to equip individuals for personal discernment is to focus first on shaping the church as a community of discernment. In other words, an individual Christian will know how to exercise spiritual discernment if the community of faith and its leaders model a discerning

life. Personal mentoring and instruction will still be necessary, but young people and new Christians who need to learn discernment will get their bearings by seeing what it looks like in the ordinary life of the congregation.

Though many tools and approaches to discernment are valuable,<sup>1</sup> two seem critical to me: the first is prayer, especially a capacity for prayer as listening (how else will we discern God's voice?); the second is a hospitable process for discernment.

### Listening prayer

Pastors and congregational leaders can nurture the practice of prayer in many ways: in public settings, such as worship, as well as in smaller, more intimate contexts such as small groups, committee meetings, and spiritual direction. If I were to choose just one practice to teach a congregation, I would focus on the prayer practice John Ackerman calls "Stop, Look, and Listen." This is a well-rounded, well-grounded way of praying that includes three simple movements:

- Stop** *Breathe out and in, focusing on the Spirit's presence as the breath of life.*
- Look** *Reflect on the past twenty-four hours, thanking God for the gifts of the day, acknowledging struggles and confessing failures, and asking God for whatever is needed for the day to come.*
- Listen** *Read aloud a brief portion of scripture and listen to how it speaks today in one's particular context. Meditate on the Word and respond.<sup>2</sup>*

These easily remembered movements correspond to three classic prayer practices—centering prayer, the consciousness examen, and *lectio divina*.<sup>3</sup> "Stop, Look, and Listen" encourages people to notice and respond to God's presence, adopting the posture essential for living the baptismal life.

Eugene Peterson once commented that it is remarkably easy for pastors to do ministry without being in touch with God. After a novice pastor gets the hang of preaching or teaching or administration, it is not all that difficult to function adequately in a public role without a dynamic, living relationship with God. In the same

way, congregations can go on “automatic”—filling slots, showing up for activities, and even enjoying one another’s fellowship, without nurturing a vital spiritual life. Because activity can so easily substitute for a relationship with God, we can believe we are fulfilling God’s purposes when we are simply keeping busy.

When congregations learn to pray, and especially to listen as they pray, they are being formed in a relationship with God, which is far different from being busy for God. Living in an ongoing relationship of prayer provides a necessary, supportive environment for the spiritual practice of discernment.

### Communal discernment

Yet people can be well practiced in prayer and still not have skills for discerning how God is calling them personally or corporately to embody God’s radical vision of grace-filled hospitality in the world. A tested and reliable process of discernment is needed in order for communities of faith to listen together to God and act in obedience.

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As with the practice of prayer, many fine resources are available for communal discernment. The Jesuits and the Quakers, for example, have long experience with such tools as Ignatian discernment and clearness committees.<sup>4</sup> Many Mennonite churches have also used a variety of discernment processes.

What we don’t have, as a body, is a common model for discernment—one that we could teach baptismal candidates and that people would understand how to use when we come together in larger groups such as regional or denominational gatherings.

One of the most fruitful discernment tools I’m aware of is one that combines the strengths of the Jesuit and Quaker approaches and honors our Anabaptist understandings of the church. The process invites engagement of the whole person—mind, heart, and body—and trusts the tradition of scripture and church history as well as the dynamic, moving presence of the Spirit today.

Developed by leaders in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), this discernment process with five movements has been used by congregations for many kinds of decisions, but especially

for those related to the congregation's engagement in God's mission.<sup>5</sup>

**First movement: Engaging Christ.** Not all decisions a congregation makes require the use of an extensive discernment process. Many administrative or program decisions can simply be entrusted to staff or committees who conscientiously and prayerfully fulfill their responsibilities on behalf of the congregation. The first step, then, is for leaders to decide whether a particular issue requires a prayerful, informed, time-intensive process of discernment.

When that decision has been made, leaders state the issue or question as clearly as they can, phrasing it in terms such as: What

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is the mind of Christ with regard to the particular situation at hand? Because the will of the majority is not necessarily the same thing as the mind of Christ, the issue is not so much *what we want to do* as *what God is calling us to do*. In *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, Diana Butler Bass makes a critical distinction between "I-questions" and "God-questions" in discernment. She quotes Frederick Schmidt, an Episcopal priest, who observes that "I-questions are driven by the need for self-actualization and a sense of entitlement," whereas God-questions point us to "the task of distinguishing the spirit or presence of God at work in the world from other, competing spirits in an effort to determine where the

spirit of God may be moving."<sup>6</sup> These questions more helpfully guide us to the mind of Christ.

When this crucial step has been taken, leaders review the core values and mission or vision statement of the congregation, to identify which of these channel markers might provide guidance for their discernment. They present this information to the congregation, testing their sense that the issue under consideration requires communal prayer and discernment.

**Second movement: Emptying ourselves.** Perhaps nothing inhibits or distorts a fruitful discernment process more than preconceived ideas and agenda brought to the discussion. Whether this baggage is conscious or unconscious, participants

need a spiritual practice that will help them identify and let go of such impediments. For the sake of engaging the process with maximum freedom, participants enter a time of silence in which they invite the Spirit to show them whatever might hinder faithful listening. A litany or a ritual, such as the following, can encourage people to willingly relinquish their ideas and personal agendas:

*Each participant in turn: For the sake of our common task, I lay aside [my preconceived idea or agenda].*

*All: These we lay down.*

*Leader (lights a candle): We light this candle to remember and welcome the presence of the Spirit of Christ among us.*

*All: We open ourselves to the light of the Spirit. Together we seek God's wisdom as we listen, pray, and work together. In all things we desire to know the mind of Christ.*

**Third movement: Encountering our past and present.** After emptying themselves of preconceptions and opening themselves to the light of the Spirit, the group remembers biblical images or texts that seem to connect with the issue at hand. This movement might well include a guided study of relevant passages.

In addition, members of the group share experiences from their own lives that could inform the discernment process. If special expertise and knowledge are required, these are sought. If certain members' perspectives are not represented in the group, leaders make arrangements to hear those voices.

**Fourth movement: Examining new possibilities.** This movement begins as an open-ended process that is sometimes called "blue sky thinking." In other words, the sky is the limit—all possible options that might honor the Spirit of Christ and the church's mission are considered. No one offers rebuttals or critiques. Instead, each option or path is expanded, making it the best it can possibly be. The group also discusses in a dispassionate way what might be the possible outcomes of each option—both positive and negative.

A time of silent reflection follows, in which participants consider what they have heard, listening for the two or three possibilities that seem to most embody God's call to the church at

this time. They name these options to one another, recording them for all to see, and noticing whether consensus seems to be emerging.

**Fifth movement: Embarking in a new direction.** This is the movement where prayer meets action. Participants ask each other: Of all the possible paths we've identified, which seems to be the one on which the Spirit rests? If there is general agreement, the group identifies what steps need to be taken to implement the decision. If a consensus hasn't emerged, the group determines what further steps of discernment are needed.

Finally, the group celebrates God's presence and guidance, giving thanks for the Spirit's illumination and committing the decision and action to God.

**Letting a decision rest.** In some churches, a decision reached by discernment is not acted on immediately. Instead, the congregation waits for several weeks or a month and then comes back to ask: Does this still seem to be the decision on which the Spirit rests? Rather than feeling pressure to act quickly or prematurely, the congregation trusts that if they have truly sensed the Spirit's leading, that direction will be confirmed with the passing of time.

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### **Discernment as spiritual formation**

This process of five movements is rooted in a profound conviction that the body of Christ can recognize and know the mind of Christ. With its nonanxious approach and contemplative pacing, it does not privilege the powerful or articulate but rather provides space for all to listen deeply and respond to God's Spirit and to one another.

Though such a process can be learned easily enough, it does require skilled, trusted facilitators. For people to genuinely face and relinquish their fears as well as their possessiveness about outcomes, they must have confidence that the process will have integrity. In other words, any attempt by leaders to rush or manipulate the process will destroy the freedom needed for true discernment. The process is also enhanced by the presence of experienced models and men-

tors who can demonstrate patient listening, ask thoughtful questions, and model deep trust in the Spirit's work, thus increasing the capacity of the entire community.

Congregations must also recognize that spiritual discernment takes time—sometimes a very long time. What is happening is much deeper than simply making a decision. The church is growing in faith, hope, and love; the community's capacity to hear God and one another is expanding; in addition, members are learning skills for discerning their own personal call to ministry and mission. As such, discernment is the lifeblood of Christian ministry and witness.

Perhaps one of the greatest gifts of a good discernment process is the energy it unleashes. Few experiences are as deeply satisfying as sensing God's Spirit moving in the body, calling and uniting believers in a common purpose. When people experience the human and divine interacting in such tangible and visible ways, they are empowered to act with confidence and joy.

### **Returning to the garden**

The restoration of the Lost Gardens of Heligan has taken more than two decades to accomplish. Instead of thorns and briars, the gardens are filled today with fragrant blossoms, healthy vegetation, and abundant crops. Creating such an environment has required the collaboration of many gardeners with extensive skills and long-term commitment to a common vision.

To cultivate a climate for spiritual discernment in the church also requires a long-term vision. The spiritual formation of hearts and minds takes time and practice; so does learning a common model for discernment.

What must finally be acknowledged is that without prayer and discernment, all our effort and activity run the risk of being little more than weeds and vines obscuring the beauty of God's garden. On the other hand, few things will cause the body of Christ to flourish more vigorously than knowing we can confidently discern God's will together. To do discernment well is a source of vitality and joy that perpetually renews the body and links us with God's abundant future. It is the practice most needed in a church that desires to be engaged in God's mission in the world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Two helpful guides for personal discernment are *Hearing with the Heart: A Gentle Guide to Discerning God's Will for Your Life*, by Debra K. Farrington (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003); and *Sacred Compass: The Way of Spiritual Discernment*, by J. Brent Bill (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2008). Two fine guides for communal discernment are *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations*, by Suzanne Farnham, Stephanie McLean, and R. Taylor McLean (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1999); and *In Tune with God: The Art of Congregational Discernment*, by Sally Weaver Glick (Scottsdale, PA: Faith and Life Resources, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> John Ackerman, *Listening to God: Spiritual Formation in Congregations* (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 2001), 136.

<sup>3</sup> For descriptions of these classic prayer practices, see *Praying with the Anabaptists: The Secret of Bearing Fruit*, by Marlene Kropf and Eddy Hall (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1994); or *Paths to Prayer: Finding Your Own Way to the Presence of God*, by Patricia D. Brown (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> A discussion of Ignatian discernment can be found in *Discernment: The Art of Choosing Well*, by Pierre Wolff (Liguori, MO: Triumph Books, 1993); or *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality*, by Margaret Silf (Chicago: Jesuit Way, 1999). The Quaker clearness committee is described well in *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, by Parker J. Palmer (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000). See also: <http://www.fgcquaker.org/library/fosteringmeetings/0208>.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Fletcher, *Take, Break, Receive: The Practice of Discernment in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, rev. ed. (Indianapolis: Disciples Home Missions and the Office of the General Minister and President of the Christian Church [Disciples of Christ], 2008). This booklet is available online at: [http://web.me.com/ispiritual/spirituality\\_pages/discernment\\_files/rfletcherdiscern.pdf](http://web.me.com/ispiritual/spirituality_pages/discernment_files/rfletcherdiscern.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 94.

## About the author

Marlene Kropf has recently retired from her role as denominational minister of worship, Mennonite Church USA Executive Leadership, as well as from the faculty of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, where she taught in the areas of spiritual formation and worship. She continues to teach in congregations, to offer spiritual direction, and to serve as co-chair of Bridgefolk (a group of sacramentally minded Mennonites and peace-minded Roman Catholics who meet annually) as well as the Bi-national Worship Council for Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada.