

# Blackhawk

PRESBYTERY

## PRACTICING DISCERNMENT: A RESOURCE FOR LEADERS

Tired of church business as usual? Yearning for a Spirit-filled path ahead? Discernment practices help us listen to the Spirit and find our way in the midst of every season of life. In this resource you will find a brief rationale for practicing discernment, as well as practical considerations to help you practice discernment with others, as a group leader or participant. For use with Sessions, congregations, committees and other ministry groups.

## DISCERNMENT VS DECISION MAKING

It is common in churches to apply the decision-making skills we have learned from life and business when planning how a church is to move forward. As Christians, we are also called to discern God's will for our lives and our congregations. The two processes are related but not the same. This is what author Henri Nouwen says:

*Christian discernment is not the same as decision making. Reaching a decision can be straightforward: we consider our goals and options; maybe we list the pros and cons of each possible choice; and then we choose the action that meets our goal most effectively. Discernment, on the other hand, is about listening and responding to that place within us where our deepest desires align with God's desire. As discerning people, we sift through our impulses, motives, and options to discover which ones lead us closer to divine love and compassion for ourselves and other people and which ones lead us further away.*

One of the findings of the Visioning Task Force is that there is great value, both personally and as congregations, to adopting a discernment process.

## ADOPTING A DISCERNMENT PROCESS

Groups often have a hard time doing the work of discernment, since it feels so much more productive to move straight into making decisions. However, as people of God our priority is to follow God's call in all things. Here are some tips to help guide your group into habits of discernment.

## PRIORITIZE PRAYER

Presbyterians often open and close meetings with prayer. During opening prayers, incorporate petitions for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Recognize that God has the wisdom and is able to give us wisdom for every decision ahead.

Use prayer to refocus a group when discussion becomes stalled or combative. Suggest that the group take a few minutes to stop and pray silently. During this time, people can stay in their seats, or walk around a different area seeking direction from God. Suggest a few questions during the time of prayer: What is most important to you, God? Where do you want to lead us? You can also bring the group back with a collective prayer asking for focus and clarity according to the mind of Christ.

## USE SPACE INTENTIONALLY

As much as possible try to modify your meeting space to create an atmosphere that encourages discernment. Light a candle, have Bibles available, create a mini-worship space, consider having meetings in a chapel, etc.

## TAKE YOUR TIME: (BECAUSE HURRY IS THE ENEMY OF DISCERNMENT)

When it is known that an item of business may require deep attention, it is helpful to give group members a head's up days or even weeks prior to time of discussion, encouraging them to pray and think about the matter individually until the time of discussion comes.

When discussion is not yielding wisdom, it is often helpful to pause within the same meeting, take a break, continue with other business, and come back to the item at hand. In the same way, if the matter does not have to be decided by the end of the day, a new time of discussion may be scheduled for the future.

Remember that most deadlines are imaginary. There are times when it is better to pause a process and not move forward with an action until there is agreement by consensus or at least a clear majority, than to have a razor thin margin of agreement. Follow spiritual movement, not self-imposed preferences or timelines.

## HEAR ALL THE VOICES

- ◆ Often the loudest voices drown out the quieter, more contemplative voices in group work. One strategy to make sure the group hears from everyone is to designate a time to go around the table/circle/room and ask everyone to share their thoughts, in seated order, about the particular item. Thoughts may be questions they have, concerns or excitement they have, or suggestions for how to proceed. This way there is a discipline to hear from everyone. Another suggestion would be to ask group members to write down their thoughts legibly and place the feedback in a bowl. People can choose to identify themselves or not in their writing. One member of the group reads all the submitted answers for the entire group to consider.
- ◆ When an item of business concerns multiple people or groups who will be affected, take the time to hear perspectives from all angles. Invite supporters and detractors to speak before the group, separately, and have members ask their questions.
- ◆ When an item of business concerns a matter where special expertise is needed, schedule hearing sessions with professionals or experts. Consult those who have walked the path before.
- ◆ When an item of business is theologically contentious, spend time reading and studying Scripture together from multiple angles and passages.

## KEEP THE GROUP FOCUSED ON DISCERNMENT

As groups learn habits of discernment, it will be important to create awareness of when we stray from discernment. Moderators and other leaders may need to watch for times when people support arguments only on personal preference or comparison with what others are doing, and invite the group to ask deeper questions, such as:

- ◆ What do we think Jesus would do in this situation?
- ◆ What does it mean to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves in the midst of this conflict?
- ◆ How has the Holy Spirit led us in the past? Do we sense the Holy Spirit communicating a priority?
- ◆ How do the potential courses of action line up with the particular calling of our congregation?

Incorporate reminders of the importance of discernment through all your work together. These may be through devotionals, comments highlighting how decisions align with the values of Christ, etc.

## RESOURCES TO CONSIDER

There are many resources available to guide individuals and groups through the process of discernment. Here are some recommendations.

Victoria G. Curtiss, *Guidelines for Community Discernment* (Presbyterian Distribution Services), 2007. **(Copies available through Blackhawk Presbytery)**

Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olson, *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* (Rowman and Littlefield), 2012.

Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (IVP), 2012.

Henri Nouwen, *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life* (Harper One), 2015.

Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going* (Rowman & Littlefield) 2019.

A special thanks to Rev. Lisa López-Meyer and the 2023 members of the Visioning Task Force and the subsequent Visioning and Assembly Planning Committee for creating this resource and envisioning its use throughout the presbytery.



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