

Why Discernment Matters

Matt Pamplin

What is it that distinguishes spiritual leadership from other kinds of leadership?

At the heart of spiritual leadership is discernment—the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and activity of God both personally and in community.

Today, a spiritual leader is someone able to guide the discernment process so the community can sense God’s desire for them and move forward on that basis.

Yet discernment does not take place in a vacuum, nor by accident. Spiritual community is the context for discernment, so the first move in cultivating a culture of discernment is to establish the leadership group as a community for discernment.

This means our life together is grounded in prayer and intentional spiritual practices, such as reading and reflecting on Scripture, silence, listening, worship and intercession, self-examination and confession.

Discernment requires us to move beyond our reliance on cognition and intellectual hard work to a place of deep listening and response to the Spirit of God within and among us. It is one thing to rely on what feels like a subjective approach when it pertains to one’s personal life; it feels much riskier when our decisions affect an entire congregation. Is there, then, a trustworthy process for actively seeking God in our corporate decisions?

Clarify the question.

The first step toward entering a discernment process is to clarify the question for discernment. Not all questions warrant a full discernment process. Some questions, such as choosing a computer system, might be answered with a 15-minute, fact-based discussion. On the other hand, who to hire as key personnel and who will wield much influence, should be a matter for group discernment.

And even when we think we know what the question is, there may be larger questions lurking underneath that hold even greater significance for us.

The Process

A true discernment process begins with a commitment to pray without ceasing. This requires more than a perfunctory prayer at the beginning of a meeting. It involves several kinds of praying throughout the entire process.

Begin with a prayer of quiet trust. A different kind of spirit descends upon us when we enter into decision-making from this stance.

Prayer of Indifference

Then we need to pray for indifference. This is not apathy. Rather, it is praying that we would be indifferent to everything but the will of God. This means I am indifferent to matters of ego, prestige, organizational politics, personal advantage, personal comfort or favor, or even my own pet agenda. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a model of this. Her prayer “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your will” (Luke 1:37) is a wonderful expression of the kind of indifference we seek as a group of leaders.

Praying for indifference is not easy for us, because most times we enter into decision-making with strong opinions and more than a little self-interest. It takes time, for often a death to self is required before we can see God’s will taking shape in our lives. Here we ask: what needs to die in me in order for the will of God to come forth in me and among us? In the discernment process, each person needs to do his or her own spiritual work around this question, and the group needs to be honest about it. Depending on the level of trust in the group, it might even be a good idea to ask, “**How many are indifferent?**” and then let each person talk about where they are with that question.

Learning to Listen

Discernment involves listening with love and attention to our experiences, to each other, to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit deep within ourselves and others, to Scripture and Christian tradition, to pertinent facts and information, to those who will be affected most deeply by our decisions, to that place in us where God’s Spirit witnesses with our spirit about those things that are true.

Take time in silence to listen to the spirit and then go around the circle asking if we have consolation or desolation (in the words of the examen) and then ask why?

After doing this ask if there are any additional comments / scriptures / pictures / promptings that go along with the answer.

Important: We don’t comment on what other people have said but we can ask clarifying questions.

We then take time to ask what would be the next steps in light of this decision and how can we continue to pray into it.