

## Finding God's Will Together

*Whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent,  
then the Israelites would set out; and in the place  
where the cloud settled down, there the Israelites would camp.  
At the command of the LORD the Israelites would set out,  
and at the command of the LORD they would camp.*

NUMBERS 9:17-18

It was a conversation similar to many I have had with Christian leaders. A pastor from a large church was telling me that his church was going through a major transition as its leaders tried to respond to the growth they were experiencing. They had outgrown their facility (a good problem to have!), so the obvious question was, "Will we add onto our facility or will we start another church?"

But clearly this was only the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the surface larger questions lurked: What should be our emphasis now? Does our mission still capture what we feel called to? Is the leadership structure effective for what is emerging now? Can we keep going this way or will we burn ourselves out if we add a building campaign and more people and activities to our plates?

Sensing the weight that he was carrying, I probed a little deeper and asked, "How are you going about answering these questions? Does your leadership team have a process for discerning God's will in these matters?"

A look of disorienting awareness crossed his face as he realized that the answer to the question was no. After recovering a bit, he said, "But we always have a time of prayer at the beginning of our meetings."

#### THE HEART OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

Many of us have a vague idea that there should be something different about our leadership as Christians—particularly if we are leading a church or organization with a spiritual purpose—but that difference usually gets reduced to a perfunctory prayer at the beginning of a meeting, and sometimes even that gets lost in the shuffle! What is it, then, that distinguishes spiritual leadership from other kinds of leadership? What distinguishes a spiritual journey from other journeys that one might embark upon?

At the heart of *spiritual* leadership and *spiritual* journeying is discernment—the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and the

activity of God both personally and in community. The Israelite journey is really a story of ongoing discernment. It is a story of a group of human beings who learned how to recognize the presence of God and then followed that Presence wherever it went. For Moses as their leader, this involved entering into God's presence regularly and routinely, asking God what he should do and then leading the people in that way. Moses' ability to trust God and to listen and respond obediently to his instructions was so crucial to the Israelites' survival that the one time he failed to follow God's instruction fully (when he struck the rock to provide water for the people rather than speaking to it as God had commanded) there were grave consequences (Numbers 20:10-13).

For the community as a whole, the journey involved ongoing response to the presence of God as they experienced it in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. When the presence of God moved, they followed it, and when the presence of God stayed, they stayed (Numbers 9). It was as simple as that. It is no wonder that when Moses recapped the Israelite journey, he emphasized how important discernment had been to the whole operation. He reminded the people of the time God told them to choose leaders to serve as judges under Moses and that the heart of their spiritual leadership was the ability to be "wise" and "discerning" (Deuteronomy 1:13).

Later on he spoke about wisdom and discernment as defining characteristics for the nation of Israel, characteristics that would be recognized and revered by other nations. He pointed out that discernment is about intimacy with God—an intimacy that other nations did not have with their gods and would marvel at. "You . . . will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who . . . will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!' For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him?" (Deuteronomy 4:6-7). This amazing opportunity to be intimate with God and discern his ways was at the heart of their identity, and it was one of the main things that would distinguish them from other nations.

### A CULTURE OF DISCERNMENT

In our day, discernment is much easier said than done. We do not have a pillar of cloud to follow by day and a pillar of fire to follow by night. We do not get to talk with God face to face or listen to his voice thundering on the top of Mount Horeb. Instead, we must rely on the more subtle dynamics of the Holy Spirit witnessing with the human spirit about things that are true (Romans 8:16). Discernment presents unique challenges in contemporary Western culture, because it 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 us and among us. It is one thing to rely on what sometimes feels like a subjective approach when it pertains to one's personal life; it feels much riskier when our decisions involve large budgets, other people's financial investments, the lives of multiple staff, reports to high-powered boards, and serving a congregation or customer base with their expectations. Is there a trustworthy process for actively seeking God relative to decisions we are making?

The *spiritual* leader is distinguished by his or her commitment and ability to guide the discernment process so the community can affirm a shared sense of God's desire for them and move forward on that basis. The practice of leadership discernment, like any other Christian discipline, is a means of creating space for God's activity in our lives. It is one way we can make ourselves available so that he can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Through the practice of discernment in community we open ourselves to the wisdom of God that is beyond human wisdom but is available to us when we ask for it.

Discernment does not take place in a vacuum, nor does it take place by accident. Spiritual community is the context for discernment, so an important prerequisite for leadership in discernment is to establish the leadership group as a community for discernment. This means that our life together as leaders is grounded in prayer and other spiritual practices. It means we maintain our commitment to Scripture, silence, listen-

ing (to God and each other), worship and intercession, self-examination and confession *as the container* for the discernment process, no matter how much we are tempted to let them slip on any given day.

Romans 12:2 indicates that the ability to discern the will of God is a natural byproduct of spiritual transformation in community. Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." This passage establishes a *causal* (not casual) relationship between the journey of spiritual transformation and the ability to discern God's will both personally and in community. Our ability to discern what we should *do* flows from our commitment to *be* together in life-transforming ways. Conversely, when our commitment to spiritual practices in community slips, we become muddled in our capacity to be truly discerning. Rather than acting from a clear sense of God's desire for us, we can be driven by our own agendas. Rather than experiencing God's peace, we might become frantic. Rather than finding clarity, it is easy to become lost in a swirl of inner and outer chaos.

### DYNAMICS OF DISCERNMENT

The impulse to discern—to know and do the will of God—is a spiritual dynamic that goes against human willfulness. When individuals, leadership groups or congregations have a desire to become more discerning, this in itself is evidence of God at work. While it is natural for a Christian person to want to do the will of God, it cannot be assumed that this desire is always at the forefront of leaders' awareness when they come together to make decisions. When this desire is at all in evidence or people start to articulate their longing for it, we should thank God for it, fan it into flame, guide the group in articulating a commitment to it and be wise in setting forth a concrete process for entering in.

As we cultivate spiritual community, the desire and the capacity for discernment begin to develop naturally, and we become more practiced at recognizing and responding to the Spirit of God within us and among

us. This is a mark of Christian maturity. By its very nature Christian discernment is a spiritual practice because it is about Spirit—the Spirit of God who is the third person of the Trinity and can be listened to and responded to. Discernment is always a gift given by the Spirit to spiritual people. “Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God’s Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Discernment is a way of seeing that is first of all a habit, enabling us to see the works of God as they are being revealed in our lives. It is a way of being in which we are steeped in listening and responding to the Spirit.

As important as the practices of discernment are, it would be improper to list them before the habit of discernment, because if the Holy Spirit has not been welcomed into the life of the discernor, practices of discernment will be empty and impotent. The habit of discernment constitutes a way of being, by which we are steeped in spirituality as a way of life; and spirituality becomes as necessary as the air we breathe. The habit of spirituality precedes the practices of discernment.

The habit of discernment is important preparation for those times when we need to make decisions and we are called to intentionally and actively seek God’s will. During such times the spiritual leader calls people into the *practice* of discernment. Discernment is grounded in our belief that God is good, that his intentions toward us are always good and that he has the power to carry them out. Without this fundamental conviction it would be hard, if not impossible, to give ourselves freely and fully to the discernment process. It is hard to open ourselves fully to Someone we don’t trust to be good to us in the deepest ways.

Discernment is also grounded in the belief that the call to love God and to love others is our ultimate calling as Christian people—whether in the day-to-day choices of our lives or in the larger decisions facing a govern-

*God’s will is the best thing that could  
happen to us under any circumstances.*

DANNY MORRIS AND CHARLES OLSEN,  
*DISCERNING GOD’S WILL TOGETHER*

ing body. Thus in every decision we make we could hope that somewhere along the way someone will ask, “What does love call us to?”

#### EXPLORING A PROCESS FOR LEADERSHIP DISCERNMENT

Community discernment at the leadership level is not mechanical, nor is it always linear. As we become more comfortable with the process, we experience it less as a step-by-step procedure and more as a creative mix of the following dynamic elements. Although the first several moves need to take place in order (for reasons that will become obvious) as a group practices together over time, different elements of discernment will happen quite naturally in ways and at times that are unique to you.

*Preparing for community discernment.* The first step toward entering into 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 fifteen-minute, fact-based discussion. However, there are other questions that require a different level of attention and prayerfulness from the entire leadership group, particularly those that shape our identity, our policies, our values and our direction. The hiring of key personnel, those who will wield significant influence, should also be a matter for discernment.

Even when we think we know what the question is, there may be a larger question lurking underneath the rest, a question that holds even greater significance for us. The question about a new building project

might deepen into a question about mission and values and whether a new building might or might not help us stay true to these. What starts out as a meeting to set strategy gives way to the deeper question of whether we are pushing our own agenda or whether God is really opening up new opportunities. What begins as a question about event scheduling raises a more far-reaching concern about pace of life and whether we are working and living together in such a way that we honor true human limitations and create space in our lives for loving God and others. Thus discernment begins with clarifying the question and perhaps even listening for the deeper question.

It is also important that we *involve the right people*. A prerequisite for community discernment is that the individuals involved are committed to the process of personal transformation. It is essential that these individuals are experienced in personal discernment as both habit and practice in their own decision-making. One very common leadership mistake is to think that we can take a group of undiscerning individuals and expect them to show up in a leadership setting and all of a sudden become discerning! Many boards and elder groups are composed primarily of people who have been successful in business ventures but may not have had much preparation or experience in the area of spiritual discernment. If this is the case, we might need to slowly change the makeup of the leadership group, or we might need to provide teaching and training before embarking on a discernment process. (Note: for a substantive treatment of the habit and practice of personal discernment, please refer to chapter 6 of my book *Sacred Rhythms*.)

Another aspect of involving the right people is to think outside the box about who else needs to be involved in the process. We can become so stuck in organizational silos that we overlook others who might have important contributions to make to the discernment process. In addition to those who are already a part of the board, the staff or the management team, we might consider: Who else has gifts of wisdom and discernment that we value? Who has information and experience that

might help us? Who are the influencers that might be able to help communicate the outcomes of our process in an inviting way to the larger community when the time comes?

There can even be several levels of involvement. There is the discernment group—those who are responsible in the end to vote or in some other way make the decision about how to move forward. These should be fully engaged in the entire process. There are also voices of input that the group needs to hear in order to make a fully informed decision—those who will be affected by the decision, those who have pertinent experiences, those who have expertise or have done research in the area being considered, those who actually have to carry out the course of action that we decide on (key staff or volunteers, administrative or operations personnel, and the like). These folks don't need to be present for everything, nor do they need to have a vote, but we will probably make wiser and more realistic decisions if we are open to their expertise.

One other type of person we might consider involving is someone who has practice and training in the art and practice of discernment. This could be a spiritual director, a *discernmentarian* (someone who guides the discernment process, much as a parliamentarian guides the process of majority rule), a clerk or convener (as such a role is defined in Quaker circles), or a sage. While each of these terms has different nuances, they all apply to someone who does not have a vested interest in any particular outcome and is able to listen prayerfully, call for silence as needed, perhaps guide the process, or comment at different points regarding what they are hearing and how they think the Spirit might be moving the group.

We also need to *establish guiding values and principles* for the discernment process. Discernment with others at the leadership level requires an extraordinary amount of safety in each other's presence, along with great clarity about what values govern the process. There are certain values that we might want to consider agreeing together not to violate for any reason, no matter how expedient it might seem. One of these values

would be our commitment to trustworthy relationships in community. Somewhere along the line, we need to grapple with the fact that learning to come together in unity is our first and most enduring task as we pattern our relationships after Christ's commitment to his own disciples. We cannot just assume these values; we must talk about them and seek to live into them with great vigor and intent. It might even be helpful to establish a written covenant with each other regarding the values and practices that will govern our deliberations.

Even if a community covenant is already in place, it is good at the beginning of a discernment process—especially if there is disagreement or lots of vested interest—to go over the covenant again and reaffirm that the group gathered for discernment will be committed to each other and to the integrity of the relationships above all else. There needs to be some basic agreement that to compromise core values for any reason would mean that we have compromised our essence and then we would not have much of value to offer others.

In a community that gathers for discernment, leaders are committed to moving beyond the kind of maneuvering and posturing that often takes place in leadership settings and are willing to tell the truth to the best of their ability. As Christians we believe God works through *all* truth—even truth that seems as if it might slow us down or complicate matters or take us into uncharted territory—to bring forth the gift of discernment. Even when the truth is hard, we take great pains to affirm the courage that it takes for each one of us to bring God-given truth to the discernment process. We will be committed to honoring one another's deep reservations or resistance to a particular direction or decision, trusting the Spirit of God in that person, and will wait for deeper understanding and unity. I have never seen a leadership group regret the decision to honor each other in this way. In fact, in leadership groups I have been a part of, God has often used this principle to save us from ourselves!

As we do the hard work of preparing, it is good to remind ourselves

of how painstaking and even tedious God was in providing guidance for the Israelites' life in community. In my own Bible reading I have often skipped from the Ten Commandments to the next exciting story because I did not have the patience to wade through the detail and tedium of Leviticus. But now I get it. The whole journey would have been lost without those guidelines! The group would have fallen apart in the wilderness, and they wouldn't have survived without each other. Without such specific guidelines, practices and disciplines to hold them under God's (and Moses') guidance, the stresses and pressures would have been too much for them. There would not have been a group to enter into the Promised Land.

*Entering into the discernment process.* A true discernment process begins with a commitment to *pray without ceasing*. This requires much more than a perfunctory prayer at the beginning of a meeting. In fact, it involves several kinds of praying throughout the entire process. When the question for discernment has been clarified, the community for discernment is assembled and guiding principles have been established, we can begin with a prayer of quiet trust like the one found in Psalm 131, in which the psalmist acknowledges his utter dependence upon God in the face of matters "too great and too marvelous for me" (v. 1). A different kind of spirit descends upon us when we enter into decision-making from this stance. When we sense that the process is getting out of hand, that human dynamics are distracting us from real issues, that we are stuck, that we are applying nothing more than human effort to the decision we face, it can be very helpful for the leader to call the group back to this prayer of quiet trust, along with some time for silence. This gives us the opportunity to shift back into a position of trust rather than being completely reliant on our own human striving.

We need to also pray for *indifference*. This is not the kind of indifference that we associate with apathy; rather, it is the prayer that we would be indifferent to everything but the will of God. Indifference in the discernment process means that I am indifferent to matters of ego, prestige,

organizational politics, personal advantage, personal comfort or favor, or even my own pet project. As Danny Morris and Charles Olsen put it: "God's will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else."

The prayer for indifference can be a very challenging prayer for us to pray, because most times we enter into decision-making with strong opinions and more than a little self-interest. It takes time, and often a death to self is required before we can see God's will taking shape in our lives. Here we ask ourselves the question, *What needs to die in me in order for the will of God to come forth in and among us?* As a part of the discernment process, each person needs to do their 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. Some might be able to report that by God's grace they have come to the point of indifference. Others might say that they are attached to one outcome or another for whatever reason but are still praying about it and asking God to bring them to a place of being indifferent to anything but the will of God.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a model of what it means to be indifferent. Her prayer "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38) is a wonderful expression of the kind of indifference we are talking about here. Her story can be helpful to us when we are struggling to let go and come to a place of indifference in our own discernment process.

As challenging as this part of the process may be, it is time and energy well spent. If we do not reach the point of indifference or if we are not at least honest about the fact that we are not indifferent, the discernment process becomes little more than a rigged election! Even the process of sharing where we are with others can help us loosen our grip on our own agenda and open ourselves to the wisdom of the group.

When we have reached a point of indifference, we are finally ready to *pray for wisdom*, which God promises to bestow on us generously

when we ask (James 1:5). Indifference is an important prerequisite to the prayer for wisdom, because the wisdom of God is often the foolishness of this world; indifference to matters of our own ego, in particular, prepares us to receive this gift.

A true discernment process continues with *listening on many levels*. This is the heart of the process and perhaps the part that takes the longest. First of all we must listen deeply to the experience(s) that caused us to be asking this question in the first place. When the New Testament believers were faced with the question of whether Gentiles should be required to be circumcised in order to be saved (Acts 15), they entered into a time of deep listening: to the conversion experience of the Gentiles, to the perspectives of the people who were with them, to the questions and debate of the Pharisees, to Peter's sense of personal calling to the Gentiles, to Paul and Barnabas's accounts of signs and wonders, to James's exposition of Scripture connecting this experience to the words of the prophets in the Old Testament as he located their story in the larger Story of God's redemptive purposes.

Finally, out of all that listening James dared to state what he felt God was saying in it all: that the church would not impose any further burden on Gentile converts beyond the essentials of the faith. The listening process had been so thorough that when James summarized it succinctly, it was clear to everyone that the wisdom of God had been given (Acts 15:13-21). In a way he functioned as a spiritual director who sat back and listened and then named what he heard God saying in the group.

This story illustrates that the discernment process involves a major commitment to listening with love and attention to our experiences, 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. We need to pay particular attention to distress, confusion and desolation. Even the more difficult emotions need to be honored.

It is also good to notice whether or not the discernment process is being dominated by the opinions of those with stronger personalities or those who talk the most. One way to make sure that all the voices that need to be heard are being heard is for the chairperson or the convener to ask, after several people have spoken more than once, "Is there anyone who hasn't spoken yet who would like to say something that hasn't been said?" Sometimes the most important thing we need to hear or the perspective that shifts the meeting or gets us unstuck is offered by the person who is the quietest and needs the most encouragement to speak.

Another part of the listening process is willingness to enter back into silence and "listen within" when human dynamics are getting out of control, when there have been too many words, when the words are no longer helping or when the process gets stuck. Discernment requires self- and other-awareness, and silence creates space for that. In silence we can become aware of our emotions, thoughts, experiences, sins, temptations, indifference (or lack thereof) so that we can see how these are affecting our participation and can take responsibility for ourselves. With a little bit of distance, we may also be able to observe dynamics in the group and name them in a way that is helpful and opens up the possibility of shifting it somehow. Most of all, we can come back to an awareness of others and the gift that they are—in our similarity and our diversity. In the silence we can come back to a place of honoring each other and the complexity of the situation.

Silence can help us cease striving and rest in God, it can bring calm to the chaos we might be feeling, it can give space for us to deal with our own inner dynamics, and it can help us listen to God—which is often what is most needed at such times. The words that follow such silence are often characterized by deeper wisdom and truer insight than what was said prior to it.

*Completing the discernment process.* After all the listening has taken place, it is time to *select an option that seems consistent with what God is*

*doing among you.* Discernment does not always come with as much clarity as it did for the New Testament elders in Acts 15. When it's not clear, you might select an option or two, seek to improve upon those options so that they are the best they can possibly be, and then weigh them to see which one seems most consistent with what God is doing among you. The Quakers, who are known for their discernment practices, would encourage folks to "place each path near the heart" and see which one brings consolation or desolation. On which option does the Spirit of God seem to rest? What is the fruit of each option? Several other questions that can be helpful in weighing the alternatives: Is there a Scripture that God brings to mind that is pertinent to the issue we are facing? What is the thing that God is making natural and easy? What brings a sense of lightness and peace even in the midst of challenge? Is there an option that enables us to do something before we do everything?

Discernment at this level takes a great deal of maturity, because when we talk about matters of consolation and desolation, we are talking about more than surface emotion. We are talking about the ability to pay attention to the subtle inner dynamics that move us toward God and toward greater abandonment to his will and those that move us away from God and the life of faith. To put it bluntly,

this way of discerning depends greatly on our spiritual and psychological maturity. If we are ambivalent and divided by chaotic emotions and neurotic conditions, our affective states will provide no positive guidance. Our task will be to understand our condition and bring order and discipline into our affective life. But as we come to achieve that discipline, in proportion as "we die and our lives are lives hidden with Christ in God," discernment becomes more effective.

Once the group has narrowed it down to one or two options, it is important to give time for individuals to *seek inner confirmation*. Sometimes in the emotion of a meeting we can get carried away by what is hap-



pening in the moment. People need some time apart from the group to become quiet in God's presence, to pray and think through the options, and to notice whether they are at peace with the decisions being made. It is good to take a break (a few minutes, an hour, a day or even a week) and then come back together and check in with each other to see what God has been saying in our quiet listening. If people are experiencing deep inner peace with one of the options, then affirm that together. If anyone is still having reservations or experiencing questions or resistance, honor them by listening to what they are experiencing and see what God has to say to you in it. Perhaps one element of a particular option needs to be tweaked, or perhaps a larger adjustment needs to be made. Trust God to work through this person's hesitation to make the option that we are choosing the best and the wisest it can be.

*Agree together.* Once the leadership group has thoroughly explored the different options and dealt with questions and resistances that the group has raised, hopefully clarity emerges pointing toward one of the options or some combination of them as particularly graced by God with wisdom and truth. In the Quaker Friends tradition, what is more important than the decision itself is the quality of life together and a sense that they have found the decision that is best for the group. In an unpublished source a Quaker pastor put it like this: "Unity is the fundamental marker that God's direction has been discerned."

When the gift of discernment has been given, those responsible for providing leadership can look at each other and say, "To the best of our ability, we agree that this particular path is God's will for us, so this is the direction we will go." Then we rest in God, thanking him for his presence with us and for the gift of discernment as it has been given. Then we are ready, as the old Nike commercial admonishes, to "Just do it!"

But discernment is not the endgame. The endgame is to actually *do* the will of God as we have come to understand it. Now is the time to bring in the strategic planners and the consultants, if you need them. Now it is time to move forward with confidence that "the one who calls

you is faithful and he will do this" (1 Thessalonians 5:24 NIV).

With all this book's emphasis on the soul of leadership, you may have been wondering how you get somewhere! Well, you get somewhere by discerning God's will and doing it together. That is what spiritual community and spiritual leadership are all about.

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## PRACTICE

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Allow your solitude today to be a time to reflect honestly about discernment as the heart of your spiritual leadership. Is discernment a way of life for you and for those who are leading with you? Is there an area of decision-making where discernment is needed, where you know that no amount of human thinking and strategizing will provide you with the wisdom you need? Take a few minutes to rest in God's presence and experience your longing for God's direction relative to this matter. Notice whether you are indifferent to anything but the will of God or whether you are attached to a particular outcome. Allow yourself to envision what it might be like for your leadership group to become a community for discernment and live more fully into this spiritual practice. If you believe the group isn't ready to embark on the whole process, is there one piece of it that you could introduce as a way of beginning?

The following prayer is one our leadership community has prayed together over and over again as we have faced issues both great and small in which we have desperately needed God's guidance. Pray it alone and pray it with those who lead with you as you face decisions together. Let it become a prayer that carries your leadership community across the threshold from decision-making to discernment.



*Oh God, by whom we are guided in judgment,  
and who raises up for us light in the darkness:  
Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties,  
the grace to ask what you would have us to do;  
that your spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices,  
and in your straight path we may not stumble;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*Amen.*

BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER