

## **GROUP DISCERNMENT AND LOCAL MEETING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

### **FUM North American Ministries Retreat**

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#### **WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE TO FOLLOW A DISCERNMENT MODEL OF DOING BUSINESS? \***

- Discernment is a spiritual discipline in which we surrender ourselves into the presence of God and trust the community to Listen to God's Leading
- Discernment keeps God front and center throughout the process
- It is about God's Leading, rather than who/what is right
- It avoids division and gives a way of staying whole when faced with decisions that have the power to break us
- When discernment is done well, the decisions stick—even hard ones with dissention—in the end we can all be together because we all own that this is God's Leading
- With discernment I can trust the process—true it is less efficient or speedy, but the outcome is stronger
- We stay in Listening mode all along—we pause and pray—we look for God's movement
- In discernment we often find that there is a third way that was not originally apparent
- Discernment is not necessarily a linear process. There may be detours. It is possible to counter a previous Leading as the process unfolds
- Doing discernment together makes us sturdy because we know God will Lead us and we can trust each other

#### **What makes the group discernment process unique?**

- Throughout the meeting we pause and Listen in silence for further Leading
- It requires patience as we persist in the process until the Leading is clear
- With a dissenting voice—we Listen again—not for compromise, but God's leading
- It takes prayer and Listening beyond the wisdom of those gathered—we need God
- Discernment allows for the truth that even good leaders are not always at their best
- Discernment can work even with less mature spiritual people present in the group
- It is about Listening for God not the wisdom of others

## **What is required from me as a leader to allow discernment to work?**

- Comfort with creativity—which sometimes feels chaotic and ambiguous
- Willingness to let others take the lead
- Ability to not have the full answer myself
- Ability to change my sense of leading
- It requires that I trust both God and the community
- Along with the community, I must persist with the process until we reach clarity
- Shift the question from what is right? To what is faithfulness?
- Start by telling the truth—as fully and honestly as you can

\*Thanks to Lorraine Watson, Pastor of North Seattle Friends Church for this part of the outline.

## **THE ADVENTURE OF GROUP DISCERNMENT**

- Lon Fendall, Jan Wood

If you were doing business using a system of voting, you would know the simple principles: The information is presented to the group. A discussion follows with people debating the various facets of the issue. Some may try to persuade others of the superiority of their opinion. In due time, a vote is taken. A decision is made. A minute records the action.

There are also simple principles for a meeting that is seeking God's guidance.

- 1. The group aligns with God's Spirit**
- 2. Information is presented to the group.**
- 2. The group waits in Listening silence to perceive what God's Spirit is communicating.**
- 3. They work together to see how these perceptions fit together.**
- 4. When they seem to have reached unity, the Clerk/Leader articulates this understanding.**
- 5. The decision is written into a minute.**
- 6. It is read to the group to confirm that it has captured both the spirit and the facts of the decision.**
- 8. Each participant honors the decision as a Leading from God.**

## **I. THE GROUP ALIGNS WITH GOD'S SPIRIT.**

*Key Goal: To be one with God's heart/perspective/Spirit.*

- Personal preparation: Forgiveness of any that you fear, disrespect, etc.
- Be fully invested in Listening.
- Fully release your Listenings to the gathered group for God to use/not use.
- Group preparation:
- Worship
- Telling the truth about the situation and ourselves in it.

## **II. INFORMATION IS PRESENTED TO THE GROUP**

*Key Goal: To empower the group to discern well!*

### **A. Before the meeting** for those who are presenting

- Divide the decision into manageable chunks.
- Provide the group with appropriate information in a timely manner.
- Verify that key players will be available.
- Allow enough time for the group to make the decision successfully.
- Ask God for guidance if there are any persons who need to be talked with before the meeting.

### **B. At the meeting**

- Present the issue in clear, neutral language that makes it clear what is being asked of the group.
- Present appropriate information in a *digestible* form (handouts, Power Point, etc.)
- Tell the truth about what the group brings to this Listening process.
- Tell the narrative of the process of work and the Leadings of God up to this point.

### **C. After the meeting**

- Follow through on all items requiring action.
- Relate both the process and the decision to appropriate audiences who were not part of the Gathered Meeting.

## **III. THE GROUP WAITS IN LISTENING SILENCE TO PERCEIVE WHAT GOD'S SPIRIT IS COMMUNICATING**

*Key goal: Seek God's wisdom collaboratively.*

### **A. Go into Listening silence.**

- Release all the thoughts that are filling your mind. This includes laying aside concerns that are not appropriate to the meeting. It includes all the ideas and opinions you have brought into the meeting.
- Make sure you are holding each participant in respect. Release your judgments. Forgive anyone who is getting crosswise with us.
- Go silent inside and out. Hold the idea up for God to communicate with you.
- Pay attention to what happens in your thinking, feelings, body, spirit

## **IV. GROUP MEMBERS WORK TOGETHER TO SEE HOW THESE PERCEPTIONS FIT TOGETHER**

*Key Goal: To be in the mystery and let God unfold the group knowing*

### **A. People share what is coming to them in the Listening.**

- It may be whole thoughts, ideas, and solutions. It may be a fragment of an idea, a mental image.
- You may not understand how it is related to the whole. Just offer up your piece.
- Speak it and then let go of it! Neither micro-manage the idea—nor worry if you said something silly or wrong. You simply gave your gift.

**B. You are Listening for God’s guidance through the various gifts of the group. It is like assembling a jigsaw puzzle. Each piece is legitimate; you simply have no idea how they fit together.**

- Don’t argue with what you are hearing. Simply receive it—and continuously ask God to show what this piece might contribute to the whole.
- Let a few seconds of silence pass between the various persons speaking. This isn’t a mechanistic act; it is the chance to let the speakers’ words find a place in your Listening.
- Don’t be alarmed if folks are saying opposite things.
- Don’t be alarmed if a person gets emotional or doesn’t “do it right.” Listen “under”—and grace them.

**C. Reflective Listening. . . . to God**

- Clerk/Leader moves into a gentle trial and error of trying to see what the patterns might be.
- Ask if anyone has a sense of how God is leading the Way Forward?
- Name what is true for the group. Let the knowing be as simple or complex as it may be.
- As possible Leadings emerge, “try them on” to see if they stay clear as a group.
- Have total freedom to move in and out of silence and speaking. Prayer and worship.
  - If the group is small, the Clerk/Leader may let this happen quite naturally.
  - If the group is large, persons would raise their hand or stand at a microphone and wait to be recognized.

**V. WHEN THE GROUP SEEMS TO HAVE REACHED UNITY THROUGH THE SPIRIT’S LEADING THE CLERK/LEADER ARTICULATES THIS UNDERSTANDING.**

*Key Goal: To accept God’s Leading for this decision and clarify the details of the action and next steps.*

**A. The Clerk/Leader carefully and tentatively expresses his/her understanding of the way the group has been led**

- If not clear about this, the clerk may call on a trusted member of the group to express the points of unity
- The Clerk provides ample opportunity for group members to express different understandings of the statement of unity
- The clerk is ready to stop, slow down, or move ahead (red light, yellow light, green light)

**B. When there is unity on some points but not on others and when it is time to move forward, the clerk may state the points on which there seems to be unity and ask for support in moving ahead toward the minute-writing step.**

- In any event, the clerk should ask for explicit expression of approval about the areas of unity and the areas needing more attention later.

**VI. THE DECISION IS WRITTEN INTO A MINUTE**

*Key Goal: To reach agreement on the general direction of the group's leading and the words that best express that leading.*

**A. The Recording Clerk/Secretary and/or the Presiding Clerk writes the Minute and reads it back to the group to see if it captures the truth of what God has done among us.**

- Group members wait in prayerful silence during this writing process.
- Possible kinds of minutes:
  1. Final Action Minute--Unity has been reached on all the important points.
    - The minute may state that there is unity in taking some action.
    - The minute may also state that unity has been reached that the proposed action will not be taken.

2. **Process Minute**--The discussion has been helpful, but there is not unity yet on the substantive issues. The minute focuses on next steps in the process.
3. **Preliminary Action Minute**--There is unity in a general way. The minute states this and the next steps toward working out the details.

**VII. THE MINUTE IS READ TO THE GROUP TO CONFIRM THAT IT  
HAS CAPTURED BOTH THE SPIRIT AND THE DETAILS OF THE DECISION**

*Key Goal: To verify this understanding and to document the action for those not present and for the group in the future.*

- A. The clerk reads the minute carefully and humbly, realizing that he/she may not have captured both the spirit and details of the action as yet.**
- B. The clerk asks for listening silence and for group members to prepare questions or comments on *substantial and important* points.** (Not on minor points of style and syntax)
- C. The clerk has to be ready even at this advanced stage of the process to:**
  - Back up to re-examine points he/she thought were clear
  - Re-phrase, add points for clarity
- D. When the clerk feels there may be unity not only on the proposed action but the minute itself, he/she asks, "Do we approve this minute?"**
  - Strong approval is usually apparent in the manner with which members respond.
  - Uncertainty may lead into other steps, dealt with in this outline under, "Dealing With Differences."

**VIII. EACH PARTICIPANT HONORS THE DECISION AS A LEADING FROM GOD**

*Key Goal: To honor Christ who has led this group in this step and to proceed with implementing the action unless and until new information and insights may suggest reconsideration.*

**A. It is not appropriate for those not participating in the meeting to second guess its outcome.**

- It's OK to ask for clarification, but not to say something like, "If I had been there I would have opposed the action, so it's not a valid decision"
- It is also not appropriate for those present in the meeting so say something like, "I was in the meeting, but I could see the direction things were going, so didn't want to say anything. I think it was a bad decision."

**B. Our perspective on the action is to celebrate it as a wonderful example of the Holy Spirit's leading. In other words, we name it as God's Leading and celebrate God's active Presence among us.**

**DEALING WITH DIFFERENCES IN GROUP DISCERNMENT**

- Lon Fendall

**I. Dealing with differences begins with viewing conflict in a group as normal, natural and in fact a positive way for the group to become stronger**

- The phrase "conflict resolution" perpetuates the myth that conflict is always destructive and should be eliminated as soon as possible.
  - Think of how unfortunate it would have been for the early Christian Church if the leaders didn't allow the open and sensitive dealing with conflict over how many of the Jewish traditions the new Gentile believers were expected to honor. (Acts 15)
  - Peace churches are particularly prone to denying conflict exists and that it can be positive, since they confuse normal group conflict with the important witness against violent conflict.
  - "Conflict transformation" is the preferred term in discussions of group processes, indicating that conflict is normal and the goal is transforming it from toxic



struggles into wholesome interaction and allowing the group to be transformed in positive ways.

**II. Sometimes conflicts over particular issues in an organization are directly connected to conflicts in the past and broken relationships that have not been dealt with.**

- What started out to be a fairly straightforward discernment process requires healing and reconciliation over situations from the past, sometimes the distant past.
- In this sense we can say that the conflict over the immediate issue is a great blessing, if it leads directly to the healing of unresolved hurts among participants in the decision making.

**III. If differences are dealt with openly and constructively throughout the group discernment process, the chance of an awkward impasse at the end of the process is minimized**

- Careful listening to God and the group members will alert the clerk and members to important and valid differences.
- Skilled paraphrasing of statements will help clarify that some opposing statements are about broader issues, not the specific proposed action.
- Sometimes clerks and members will be led to ask particular members if they have insights on the subject early in the discussion process, sensing that they may have concerns that could best be dealt with if expressed.
- Respect toward and attentiveness to members' statements and their underlying emotions will help them to understand that the emerging unity has taken into account their expressions and feelings.
- There can never be too much silent listening and attentiveness while persons are speaking during the entire process.

**IV. Sometimes the solution to significant differences among members is best solved by agreeing that the discussion will be resumed at a future meeting.**

- Only occasionally is it essential to act on something at a given meeting.
- If waiting until the next scheduled meeting seems inappropriate or unnecessary, the clerk should consider proposing a "called meeting" to continue the discussion.

- Sometime all members need is time to think about the issue, gather some information, talk to some people, and pray for direction.
- There are lots of options for active consideration during the interval before another meeting.
  - “Listening meetings”
    - Ad hoc group or standing committee tasked with gathering information and insights.

**V. An effective clerk deals with differences throughout the discussion.**

- By “testing” points of possible unity as they emerge during the discussion
- By carefully framing the general statement of unity in a way that acknowledges points on which there is not unity and being sensitive to individual perspectives that may not clash with the action proposed.
- By extremely careful writing of the minute that acknowledges that some may be close to “standing aside” but may not feel the need to if their points are included in the minute.

**VI. The most difficult stage of the process is helping members with differences consider a step which does not disrupt the unity of the group.**

- A. The most dramatic step for a member is asking to “stand in the way of” a proposed action.
- One possibility is that this is actually the Holy Spirit saying through someone that the proposed action is not in the will of God. It is the work of the “lonely prophet” to present this position courageously.
    - It’s hard to imagine that this position could be taken by someone who has not yet expressed their concerns about the proposed action.
  - Another possibility is that someone is acting out of the leading of the Holy Spirit.
- B. “Standing aside” is the more common option that some may wish to take.
- The clerk should try to re-frame this opposition as “not being able to unite.”

- The important difference is isolating the concern to the issue at hand, not stepping away from fellowship with the group.
- The clerk should avoid accepting this from someone who has not yet expressed his or her concerns.
- The presiding clerk should not encourage members to stand aside, but may suggest it if the person needs some way to have their opposition recognized.
- The recording clerk should generally not include the names in the minutes.