To Discern the Body is to Become the Body

An investigation into the communal discernment practices of the Church

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Contents

Acknowledgements and Dedication

I would like to thank my family, friends and colleagues who have supported me in the effort to complete this research project which took a total of 12 years.

I would also like to thank Anne Wilson for her expertise in proofreading, formatting and layout.

My thesis is dedicated to the loving memory of my mother, Erika Maria Julie Panne, neé Overhoff (1924–2009) whose love and faith have shaped me for life.

Abstract

This thesis investigates a number of communal discernment traditions in the life of the Church. Following a methodology of mutual ecclesial learning and receptive ecumenism I am asking: What can each tradition of discernment learn from the other? In describing the various traditions I take a special interest in the interactive skills that are required for communal discernment. I argue that as a result of prayerful listening and waiting as part of the process of communal discernment the interactions among the participants take on the character of spiritual practices, in that listening to God and to one another become one and the same. As a result, prayerful interactions directed to God and to one another, can become entry points for the Spirit to influence a community's decision making and persons become active participants in the Spirit's work.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

12 October 2013

Name   Date

Introduction: the approach to the research topic, methodology, structure and delineation

The church's present reality

In a special report of the Alban Institute, James P. Wind, current president of the Alban Institute, and Gil Rendle, senior researcher at the same Institute, summarise the result of a nationwide debate among church leaders in America over what would best describe the church's present reality:

> Some … leaders focus on turmoil saying, …, that American religion still has not faced up to the depth of its predicament despite mountains of statistics about decline and countless stories of institutional pain. Others say that we have been blinded by all the turmoil and crisis talk and have missed the ferment, growth, and new vitality emerging in many places in American religious life. … Indeed, it is the paradoxical character of this period of great transition in American religion – one filled with emergent vitality on the one hand and systemic dysfunction on the other – that makes ours such a complex time.[1]

The phenomena of turmoil and decline, spiritual ferment and vitality are relevant to the context of this thesis. Because managing the tension between the decline of a no longer functioning system and equally, responding to the emergence of new vitality requires the ancient practice of communal spiritual discernment. Only where a way through the maze of decline and new life is navigated with discerning hearts and minds can the church hope to create new communities that are thriving in ministry and mission.

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1 James P. Wind, Gil Rendle, 'The Leadership Situation Facing American Congregations: An Alban Institute Special Report.' 1–31. In: Richard Bass, (ed.), *Leadership in Congregations*. With a foreword by Diana Butler Bass. Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2009, 1, 2.

Permeative, missional ecclesiologies as trajectories for communal discernment

When I began my research on communal spiritual discernment practices, about eleven years ago, there was little interest in the subject in many of the writings that address aspects of congregational life. But in the course of the past decade, this situation has radically changed. Many Christians in lay and ordained leadership positions have involved themselves in a multitude of innovative discipleship initiatives unseen in the life of a Church that lives to a large extent in fear of its decline. This flurry of grass-root participation in mission and ministry that will later be considered in more detail, has led to another groundbreaking development which has affected the work of the academy. Ecclesiology, that is the work of theological reflection of the life and practices of the church and the construction of concepts that adequately articulate the being of the church, is no longer exclusively exercised by the academy. Instead, the academic work of ecclesiology is constantly enriched by impulses from a multitude of Christian practices that are sprouting up within the context of local congregations. In the midst of the tension between turmoil and ferment there is considerable evidence that communal spiritual discernment has become an important tool for local congregations that seek to advance the church's mission locally. The following two examples shall illustrate this point. They both come from ministry practitioners involved in congregational ministry, one was written by a Uniting Church minister, the other by an Anglican priest.

The first voice comes from Australian Uniting Church theologian and ordained minister Denham Grierson who outlines a mode of mission and ministry that requires the practice of communal discernment. He espouses an understanding of the local congregation that is "at work at the heart of cultural expression as light, salt [and] yeast", suggesting that this kind of fermenting activity should take place in the specific neighbourhood of each local congregation.[2] The local congregation's task is to intentionally discern the ways of being light, salt and yeast to its neighbours, because when it does so effectively, it embodies "[the] vision of life in the

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2   Denham Grierson, *A People on the Way. Congregation, Mission & Australian Culture.* Melbourne, Australia: David Lovell Publishing, 1991, 60.

Kingdom".[3] Grierson's articulation of this mission of infiltration by the congregation is further developed in the second voice.

The second voice, five years later, comes from the British Isles. In *Practising Community. The Task of the Local Church*, Anglican Canon Robin Greenwood introduces the core task of the Church as follows:

> God is summoning the Church to reframe itself by listening acutely to the new demands of mission and ministry at the opening of a new era. In a period of transition the hope that comes of commitment to prayer will be required while we live through the chaos associated with transformations of identity.[4]

According to Greenwood, God is calling the Church into a process of "listening acutely", because the Church finds itself at the threshold of an era of disorientation, the "chaos" of not knowing itself anymore. As part of this acute listening process the Church assumes the posture of prayer, of intentional hearing, of sharpening its perceptivity to God's guidance. Listening to the needs of the world to which the church is sent while maintaining an open channel of communication with God, are two of the essential spiritual practices that are instrumental in this era of finding a new footing.

The community's practice of prayer carries it through "a period of transition", a time of an emergence of new identity. What kind of prayer is this? Greenwood argues that the practice of prayer must be driven by "courage, commitment and a constantly deepening spirituality to stay with the uncertainty rather than attempt to avoid it."[5] The Church has to get used to living in a state of 'not-knowing'. The Church's commitment to prayer will function as compass while cultivating a genuine openness to becoming more closely reformed by the Spirit into the image of God. Greenwood is not interested in the local congregation as place for gifted individuals or for the cleric as charismatic leader.[6] He has the 'ordinary' Christians, rather than exceptional individuals, in mind. In the emergence of the Church's new identity the centre of

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3   Ibid., 60.
4   Robin Greenwood. *Practising Community. The Task of the Local Church*. London: SPCK, 1996, 2.
5   Ibid., 2.
6   Ibid., 26–27.

influence, activity and new life is placed into the hands of the priesthood of all believers, rather than delegated to the expertise of a special few. There is a theological reason for choosing this starting point.

The term 'image of God' suggests that Greenwood's ecclesiological trajectory is not christologically grounded but is found in the communion of the divine persons.[7] He believes that the divine persons' indwelling of one another in love should become the formational model for the congregation. Only when the proclamation of God's love in Christ is reflected in the witness of mutually loving relationships does the Church demonstrate credibility to the world it seeks to serve. However, loving relationships among those who follow Christ are not enough. God's mission must unfold in loving service to the surrounding neighbourhood. The local congregation needs to grow into "a servant community".[8] Christians are not only to love one another as Christ has loved them, but also serve those neighbours who are not members of their community. By growing in love for one another **and** in going out to serve the needs of unchurched neighbourhoods the local congregation embodies its new missional identity most genuinely. In the words of Alan Ecclestone:

> The Church's real purpose should be a network of communities learning to love one
> another, leavening the whole populace and so transforming this devilish society we
> live in into something nearer the kingdom of God.[9]

In taking this stance Greenwood turns his back on the classic evangelistic approach of the past that sought to draw the world into the church. Instead he suggests a model of mission that sends the members of the Church into the world, effecting the gradual leavening of the whole of society by transformative servanthood-love into the space of justice and peace which Jesus proclaimed as the Kingdom of Heaven. The anchoring of the mission of the congregation in the local context happens in a slow and organic way, grounded in a grass-roots perspective. It moves from the bottom up or from the inside out. The whole congregation is invited to bring the grace-filled presence of God to places in the community where its absence has been discerned; or,

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7   Ibid., 32–34.
8   Ibid., 37.
9   Alan Ecclestone. *Church Times*, 19 June 1992, in Greenwood, Practising Community, 37.

alternatively, to fan God's presence into flame in those places in the wider community where its flickering has been discerned.

As the local community is drawn deeper into the love of the divine communion and begins to emulate this love with one another and as it extends this love into their neighbourhoods the breaking in of God's Reign that Jesus had anticipated and proclaimed unfolds. Thus, the inward consolidation of loving community and the outward movement of offering servanthood love to the neighbourhood become indicative of the presence of God's Reign making it the guiding paradigm for what I call twenty-first century permeative, missional ecclesiologies.[10]

The role of the Spirit in inward consolidation and outward focus

The work of the Spirit is essential in both the building up of the Christian community and in moving out to serve the wider community. The importance of the role of the Spirit in the mission of the Church had been already asserted by Lesslie Newbigin in 1963 who had anchored his take on ecumenical ecclesiology in Trinitarian, and, more particularly, in pneumatological thinking.[11] Newbigin contended that the church and "a true doctrine of missions must make a large place for the Holy Spirit."[12] He gave the Spirit a central role and asserted that

> it is the Spirit himself, rather than the disciples, who is the witness of that which the Father is doing. It is he who speaks when the persecuted disciples are on trial. It is he who convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgment – … [i]t is he who is, properly speaking, the missionary.[13]

In his claim of the participation of the Spirit in mission, Newbigin was in close keeping with the Reformed tradition's theology of ministry. John Calvin (1509–1564) in his *Catechism* of 1541

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10   For the emergence of a missional ecclesiology see also Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen. *An Introduction to Ecclesiology. Ecumenical, Historical & Global Perspectives.* Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2002, especially 151–165. Kärkkäinen's chapter focuses on Lesslie Newbigin whose writings pioneered the key notions of a missional ecclesiology: the church in mission as a corporately justified saved and unified body, see 152–154. Kärkkäinen points out that Pentecostalism has to be acknowledged as third force in the ecumenical dialogue between Catholic and Protestant positions. Between the pulpit and the altar as sites for the enactment and unfolding of faith there needs to be a recognition of the Spirit as facilitator and authenticator of unity.

11   Lesslie Newbigin. *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine For Today's Mission.* London: Edinburgh House, 1963.

12   Ibid., 31.

13   Ibid., 37.

had distinguished between the "external minister" who "holds forth the vocal word" which "is received by the ears" and the "internal minister, the Holy Spirit" who

> truly communicates the thing proclaimed through the word that is Christ to the souls of all who will, so that it is not necessary that Christ or for that matter his word be received through the organs of the body, but the Holy Spirit effects this union by his secret virtue, by creating faith in us by which he makes us living members of Christ.[14]

Outward proclamation of Christ's saving love is accompanied by the Spirit's work of inward realisation perpetuating the creation of faith. In Calvin's thinking the Spirit is not only the spiritual translator of Christ's message to the listener, but the Spirit is also involved in bringing to life the relationship between Christ and the listener and connecting the listener more fully with Christ. The Christological and pneumatological dimension of proclaiming the Word and living by the Word are inseparably intertwined.

A congregation involved in developing loving relationships will frequently listen to the proclaimed word and will thus be exposed to the translating and incorporating work of the Spirit. In the same way, a congregation seeking to discern the shape of its mission will intentionally seek out and heavily rely on the guidance of the Spirit. Either way, the work of the Spirit is of paramount importance to the inward consolidation and outward missional engagement of its life. But how the Spirit is involved in the process of communal discernment requires further clarification.

The Spirit's role in the process of communal discernment

The literature which shows that the practice of personal and communal spiritual discernment belongs in the domain of the work of the Spirit also says that the Spirit participates, at an essential level, in the interactions of those who gather to discern a congregation's direction in mission and

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14   John Calvin. *Catechism of the Church of Geneva. Being a form of instruction for the children in the doctrine of Christ.* At http://www. ondoctrine.com/2cal0504.htm Accessed 20/10/2010. Quoted from William Dyrness, 'Spaces for an Evangelical Ecclesiology.' 251–272. Dyrness quotes from *Calvin: Theological Treatises.* Translated with introduction and notes by J.K.S. Reid. Philadelphia: Westminster 1954, 157. In: Mark Husbands, Daniel J. Treier, (eds.), *The Community of the Word. Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology.* Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press; Leicester, England: Apollos, 2005, 253.

ministry. Duncan Reid[15] has pointed out that the Spirit often finds its most authentic expression "in a sense of yearning for a transfiguration of our reality, a transformation that neither trivialises nor abandons our experienced reality, but rather dignifies and redeems it."[16] Yearning suggests the stretching of the imagination toward a reality that does not yet exist. It signifies an important point of contact with the Church searching for its new identity in loving community and servanthood oriented mission. Missiologist Kirsteen Kim[17] has claimed that

> that the development of pneumatology in the contemporary West will be less concerned about the essence and divine origin of the Spirit and more about the Spirit's mission in and to the world … The interest today is … in the practical questions of how and where the spirit is to be discerned.[18]

If the Spirit is present in the yearning of Christ's followers for new life, inwardly and outwardly, then the Spirit will also be at work when what the community is yearning for is discerned and enacted.

Prayer and the Spirit

Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger states that the "spiritual bonds that knit a community together depend on the work of prayer through the Holy Spirit."[19] The Spirit's involvement in the practice of prayer is strongly affirmed in a number of New Testament scriptures.[20] The active presence of

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15   Duncan Reid, 'What is the Spirit saying? Trends in pneumatology.' 16–21. In *St. Mark's Review*, Vol 171, Spring 1997, 16.

16   Reid, 'What is the Spirit saying', 17.

17   Kirsteen Kim. *The Holy Spirit in the World. A Global Conversation.* New York: SPCK, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 2007, 23.

18   Ibid., 2.

19   Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger. *Pray without Ceasing. Revitalizing Pastoral Care.* Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006, x.

20   See especially Paul's comments in Romans 8, where Paul initially contrasts those who live *kata sarka* with those who walk *kata pneuma* (verse 5). The apparent juxtaposition of spirit over and against the flesh is later weakened, when Paul places the Spirit at the heart of a deeply intimate, yet wordless connection with God that consists in a groaning for renewal inherent in all creation (verse 22). Furthermore, in verse 23 he talks about "us" as "first fruits of the Spirit"; and in verse 26 he explains the role of the Spirit as intercessor between the 'saints' who do not know how to pray and God. His approach resonates with the Johannine understanding of the Spirit as intercessor (Jn 16:13). Whilst there are other important texts on prayer that involve Jesus, especially the Lord's prayer (Mat. 6: 9–13; Luke 11: 2–5) and those texts that depict Jesus in prayer, for example, in Gethsemane (Mk 14: 36–37; Mat 26: 39 and repetitions; Lk 22: 42–44), or in John's Fare well discourses (Jn 17), Paul's approach to the Spirit's role as outlined in Romans 8 is foundational to the work of the Spirit in communal discernment in this thesis.

the Spirit in any Christian's life is firstly affirmed in baptism.[21] Furthermore, apart from the fact that the Spirit is given to the Church at Pentecost (Acts 2: 1–11), the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23) and the gifts of the Spirit (I Cor 12: 1–12) are available to every follower of Christ. From these brief references the pivotal involvement of the Spirit in the life of the Christian community and its members is clear.

If prayer is understood as communication between a person/group and God, then the Spirit's participation can be assumed at every level, in every aspect of this particular form of communication in which the One at the other end remains invisible, yet often tangibly present. Marjorie J. Thompson describes prayer as a form of "genuine dialogue" which "asks us to listen as well as to speak, to receive in order to respond."[22] The Spirit's involvement in prayer specifically relates to the Spirit's participation in the sense of presence and availability, speaking and listening in prayerfully receiving and joining for action of a person or a community.

The reflection on these three themes: the work of the Spirit, the practice of prayer and the formation of community for the sake of discernment goes to the heart of this investigation. For the purpose of this thesis I am taking the view that the Spirit is not only at work in the practice of every element of communication that is part of the joint discernment process, but the Spirit is also instrumental in the formation of the relationship of the members with one another and with God. This anchors the focus of this research project more in the interactive process that leads to discerned outcomes than the outcomes themselves, or the question of authenticating discerned outcomes. More particularly, I am interested in the communicative practices and the relational environment that enact the relationships between members and members and God.

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21   In the ecumenical document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.* Faith and Order Paper 111. World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1982. At: http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-faith-and-order-paper-no-111-the-lima-text?set_language=en Accessed 25/09/2013. The meaning of baptism is detailed in para. II. C. 5. it states: "The Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of people before, in and after their baptism. It is the same Spirit who revealed Jesus as the Son (Mark 1:10–11) and who empowered and united the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2). God bestows upon all baptized persons the anointing and the promise of the Holy Spirit, marks them with a seal and implants in their hearts the first instalment of their inheritance as sons and daughters of God. The Holy Spirit nurtures the life of faith in their hearts until the final deliverance when they will enter into its full possession, to the praise of the glory of God (II Cor. 1:21—22; Eph. 1:13–14)."

22   Marjorie J. Thompson. *Soul Feast. An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life.* Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2005, 34–35.

Interaction and relationships

Gregory Bateson (1904–1980) was the first anthropologist who developed a vocabulary that related to 'the ecology of life'. In trying to capture the nature of 'ecology'[23] Bateson introduced a language that focused on "interaction" and "relationship" as the central connecting realities between living natural systems or interacting parties. He defined a relationship like this:

> It is correct (and a great improvement) to begin to think of the two parties to [an] interaction as two eyes, each given a monocular view of what goes on and, together giving a binocular view in depth. This double view is the relationship.[24]

Interactions, or as they are also called by systems thinkers, 'transactions'[25], are understood in terms of the exchange of information. They signify complex sets of data that flow back and forth on verbal and non verbal tracks of recognition. The key premises of an ecological or systems' view centre around the "nonsummativity (the whole is more than the sum of parts; complexity increases exponentially rather than additively) and nonisolability (variables – or individuals – cannot be understood out of context.)"[26] Interacting parties are inseparably connected and can only be understood with and through one another, providing the relational context for each other's personhood. The idea that life is made up of interdependent relationships requires a rerouting of the attention in terms of where and how knowledge is found. The Western model of social reality, based on the notion of 'individuals' who exercise more or less free choices[27] is stood on its head when said to originate in what happens between persons, not inside of persons. In the ecological approach the model of the person as container with clearly defined inside/outside boundaries is replaced with the model of a person as living interacting system. Bateson explains this further:

23 The dictionary defines 'ecology' both as a branch of biology and as part of 'human ecology': " the branch of biology that deals with relations of organisms with one another and to their physical surroundings", and 'human ecology' as "the study of the interactions of people in their environment". The Australian Oxford Dictionary, Bruce Moore (ed.) at the Australian National Dictionary Centre. New York: Oxford University Press, 414.

24 Gregory Bateson. *Mind and Nature. A necessary Unit.* London: Wildwood House; Bookwise Australia, 1979, 133.

25 Carol Wilder-Mott. 'Rigor and Imagination.' 5–42. In: Carol Wilder and John H. Weakland (eds.) *Rigor and Imagination. Essays from the Legacy of Gregory Bateson.* New York, Praeger Publishers, 1981, 24.

26 Ibid., 24.

27 For a discussion of the development of 'the individual' in historic perspective see Elisabeth Porter's book, *Women and Moral Identity.* Sydney: Allen Unwin, 1991, chapter 5, 122–150; and Gloria Albrecht, *The Character of our Communities. Toward and Ethic of Liberation for the Church.* Nashville, Abingdon, 1995, chapter 3, 62–102.

> Relationship is not internal to the single person. It is nonsense to talk about "dependency" or "aggressiveness" or "pride," and so on. All such words have their roots in what happens between persons, not in some something-or-other inside a person.[28]

Discoveries or achievements in this model are not regarded as individual actions, but always conceived of as results of interactions with others. Because every relationship is made up of at least two descriptions of reality, it has at least two, equally important descriptions, or, as Bateson puts it, every relationship consists of a "double-description" or, of "combinations of double descriptions."[29] The fact that relationships are expressed and practised through interactions means that interactions are pivotal for the creation and understanding of a shared reality. Bateson's notion of relationship goes further than assuming that human beings are merely social in nature. He places the very core of personhood into the interactive process.

Interactions as part of communal discernment take place in a number of different settings: person-to-person(s), person(s)-to-God, God/Spirit-to-person(s) and person-to-self, referring to inter- and intra-personal interaction. Together these sets of interaction form a dynamic, living ecology of relationships which includes "the message that is communicated, the subjects who communicate, their interaction, and the actual context surrounding the communicative act."[30] When considering the nature of these relationships in light of Bateson's understanding, the 'in-between-ness' or the 'inter' in interaction takes centre stage. Not only the content of what is exchanged, but also how it is exchanged is of importance for the process of communal discernment.

As I have stated in the paragraphs above, the Spirit is present to and active in a person's or group's prayer. If person-to-God communication is an arena for the work of the Spirit, then identifying the microcosm or the building blocks of prayerful communication, i.e. speaking, listening, receiving and responding, as Thompson put it, might yield a fuller and richer description of how and where the Spirit is at work. Furthermore, in characterising the relational environment

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28   Bateson, *Mind and Nature*, 129.

29   Ibid., 133.

30   Matthias Scharer & Bernd Jochen Hilberath. *The Practice of Communicative Theology. An introduction to a new theological culture*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 29.

of a discerning community it will be important to ascertain which elements enhance and which diminish or disadvantage the perception of the work of the Spirit. And although the Spirit can never entirely be confined to any particular language, culture, faith or circumstance[31], and although it is important to remember the Spirit's freedom to move wherever it chooses[32] I will set out to describe a specific relational environment and its respective interactive practices that, at a minimum, point to the possibility of the Spirit's presence.

The guiding propositions

Although a great deal of emphasis will be placed on the communal dimension of discernment, the communal cannot be separated from the personal facet. Discerning communities are made up of discerning persons who interact with God and with one another to reach a shared discerned outcome. In light of these considerations I would firstly like to propose that,

> *communal discernment is a process for which the members of a Christian community gather to prayerfully exercise their faith, in the hope of discovering binding spiritual direction for the sake of faithful action.*

The importance of the gathered community to prayerfully exercise its faith for the sake of discernment, the relational environment and the particular interactive practices will be of continuing interest throughout this investigation. Each tradition of spiritual discernment will contribute its own facet to the larger picture of the Church's discernment in decision making. Instead of treating communal discernment as a case of church government or as an example of church order, I will present it as a special case of Spirit-influenced, prayerful interacting, which takes on the character of a spiritual practice in the context of communal discernment, because all interactions becomes increasingly God-directed, even in person-to-person interactions.

In using the term 'prayerful interacting' I am not merely referring to the exchange of words between participants or words spoken to God. Rather, I am pointing to a complex, multi-layered,

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31   See Kim, *The Holy Spirit in the World*, 23.

32   See John 3: 7–8, where Jesus says, "Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from and where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (NRSV).

multi-directional set of person-to-person and person-to-God exchanges, that continuously influence the participants in their interactions with God, others and self in expressive and receptive ways. David Augsburger speaks of a 'tri-polar' spirituality which has three directions "it is inwardly directed, upwardly compliant, and outwardly committed."[33] The movement of a person's attention turns to the self, to God and to others. Van Deusen Hunsinger calls it "the matrix of three-dimensional listening – to God, to the other, and to our inmost selves."[34]

Marjorie Thompson points to the possibility that a prayerful person may discover God speaking through ordinary activities, planned events or day-to-day interactions.[35] Something similar can be said for the interactions that are part of the communal discernment process. I, therefore, make a second core claim in this investigation positing that

> *when a group gathers for a communal process of discernment or faith-based decision making, all facets of interacting change from being casual, arbitrary and habitual toward becoming a potential arena for the Spirit's promptings. Because of the prayerful, Spirit-led nature of the communal discernment process every aspect of interaction takes on the character of a spiritual practice.*

As I move through the coming chapters these propositions will inform the way in which the diversity of communal discernment practices and their particular contributions will be investigated. What place is given to prayer and how is it practised as part of the discernment process? What attention is given to the relational environment and the interactions of the members with one another? How and where is the Spirit's activity located? How are outcomes ascertained and decisions made? These are some of the questions I will attempt to answer.

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33 David Augsburger. *Dissident Discipleship. A Spirituality of Self-Surrender, Love of God, and Love of Neighbour.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2006, 13.

34 Van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray without Ceasing,* xiii.

35 Thompson, *Soul Feast,* 37.

Methodology: Mutual ecclesial learning

As part of this project I have selected a number of Christian practices that have shown a strong commitment to practising communal discernment as part of their decision making. I am investigating a diversity of communal discernment practices by searching for common, different and complementary elements among them. Naturally, different traditions have developed different practices of communal discernment. Discernment in the Jewish tradition was predominantly a prophetic affair. Early Christian practices of discernment took quite a different form. Followers of Christ practiced discernment at the earliest times to find direction. Soon after, discernment became an essential practice in desert and monastic contexts. They generated methods, postures and experiences that have influenced the practice of discernment to this day. The Ignatian tradition of discernment has arisen from desert spirituality and monastic practices. Although Ignatius created a form of communal discernment with his fellow brothers, his individual approach to discernment has become far better known. Both will be explored in terms of the role of prayer, interaction and the work of the Spirit. In looking further afield the peculiarities of Catholic and Protestant preferences in the practice of spiritual direction and communal discernment will surface.

In recent years the contemporary landscape of the Church's way of doing business has received important impulses from spiritual discernment and secular consensus models of decision making. A key motive for choosing the issue of communal spiritual discernment as subject of a research project has arisen from my own involvement in the life of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA). In the early nineties the UCA introduced a consensus model of decision making, entitled *The Manual for Meetings* as its new set of business procedures. The *Manual* was of interest to me because it claims to engage in spiritual discernment as part of its decision making. (Para. 1.1) I was intrigued by the fact, that an entire church had questioned its traditional decision making practice and had replaced previous procedures with an approach that made room for consensus building. This process included a greater acknowledgement of faith and an acknowledgement of the movement of the Spirit in decision making.

The investigation of the Uniting Church's consensus procedures led me to include another way of practising so called "voteless decision making"[36], found in the tradition of the 'Society of Friends', also called 'Quakers'. Friends look back on a 350 year old history of dealing with business as part of their worship practice. American Friend Eden Grace explains that Quaker decision making is

> rooted in our deepest theological affirmations, and is one of our highest spiritual experiences. To ask a Quaker to describe the Meeting for Business is to ask for a testimony of the core of our faith.[37]

As part of this investigation I will pursue a methodology that reads different communal discernment practices alongside one another with an attitude of respect for each tradition's unique contribution. I will consider each approach on its own terms and acknowledge each tradition's particularity. But I will also search for points of contact and complementarity. This methodology differs somewhat from the classical 'compare and contrast' engagement with concepts or practices, in that my interest lies in creating a mosaic like picture[38] of communal discernment that includes a number of different practices which, when viewed in synopsis, offer a fuller, richer, more shaded picture. This approach works from the attitude that none of the traditions provides all there is to know and practise in relation to communal discernment, but that each tradition offers an important facet to a larger picture. Hence, instead of developing a general lens that highlights weaknesses and strengths and criteria through which each model is to be critiqued, I will be using descriptive tools informed by the ecumenical methodology called "mutual ecclesial learning". The pedagogy of this perspective was recently articulated as part of the overall move towards 'receptive ecumenism'. Its central tenets hold

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36   The term "voteless" in relation to decision making is taken from the subtitle of Michael J. Sheeran's book on Quaker business practice called, *Beyond Majority Rule. Voteless decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*. Second Impression. Pennsylvania: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1985.

37   Eden Grace, 'An Introduction to Quaker Business Practice.' This paper was prepared for a subcommittee meeting on the Special Commission of Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches, Damascus Syria, March 2000. It can be found on Eden Grace's personal website: http://www.edengrace.org/quakerbusiness.html Accessed 25/09/2007.

38   I am not using the word 'mosaic' in any specialised meaning but in its obvious meaning, as a picture made up of differently shaped pieces that when laid next to each other offer a new picture.

that further ecumenical progress will become possible if – and only if – rather than asking what *other* traditions might need to learn from us, each tradition instead takes the creatively challenging step of examining what *it* both needs to learn and can learn (or 'receive') with integrity from its others. … Far from ignoring particularity and difference, the aim at work in *Receptive Ecumenism* is for each of the Christian traditions, singly and jointly, to become more, not less, than they currently are by recognising their own respective sticking points and correlatively learning from and receiving of each other's particular gifts.[39]

The pedagogy of mutual ecclesial learning invites the presentation of contributions and limitations from within each tradition, calling for humility in each tradition in accepting its limitations and recognising its own need for further learning. Although this thesis is not conceived as an ecumenical study, it seeks to effectively create an opportunity for reflection on mutual ecclesial learning. It does so by investigating a diversity of communal discernment practices from a variety of different traditions and by honouring each tradition's particular roots and expressions. This will require at times excursions into some of the particular historical circumstances under which certain practices of discernment were born and found their unique shape. Because different communal discernment practices hold pieces of a larger picture, each facet or tradition will also contribute an important element to an emerging fuller understanding of the practice of discernment.

The Literature

A large number of publications used in this inquiry on communal discernment are not written with scholarly intent, but with a focus on the experiential and practical aspects of the process of discernment. Furthermore, they describe essential features of the spiritual formation relevant

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39   Excerpt from a conference pamphlet of the 3rd Annual Gathering of the Ecclesiological Investigations Network which hosted the 2nd International Receptive Ecumenism Conference at The Centre for Catholic Studies, Department of Theology & Religion, Durham University, UK & St Cuthbert's Seminary, Ushaw College, Durham at Ushaw College, Durham, 11th–15th January 2009. At: http://www.centreforcatholicstudies.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/microsoft-word-jan09-reconf-briefingparticipants_web_.pdf Accessed 27/01/2011.

for a person or community involved in discernment.[40] What characterises these writings is the incorporation of a wide variety of materials, such as educational instructions on discernment procedures, devotional material to inspire facilitators and participants, illustrative stories and anecdotes interspersed with scriptural quotations and testimonies – all of which sit alongside practical information on how to conduct the discernment process. Communal discernment may occur in the context of a religious community, a local congregation, a meeting for clearness, a communal spiritual direction process or a church's national assembly. The common factor for all these contexts is the desire to make a decision that is notably aligned with God's will or tangibly influenced by the Spirit. So how do these publications contribute to a scholarly investigation? Although not written for the academy and in many cases not written by academics, the combined depiction of discerning practices, theological reflection and instruction, make for a unique genre of literature that can contribute valuable data on communal and personal discernment. Admittedly, none of these writings will provide sharp definitions on personhood, the church, discernment, the work of the Spirit, the being of God or the doctrine of divine providence. Nor will they redefine divine revelation or provide a new theory of sanctification. This is the case because this type of data has mostly been generated from lived experience and sources that reflect on lived spiritual practices and experiences. These writings prove to be valuable, because in the unique mix of descriptive material, instructions, quotes from the scriptures, stories of saints and other illustrative material, they approximate a contemporary type of wisdom writings.[41] I will, therefore classify this material loosely as a form of spiritual wisdom literature.

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40   See footnote 71 of this thesis. Also: John Ackerman, *Listening to God. Spiritual Formation in Congregations.* The Alban Institute, 2001; Debra K. Farrington, *Hearing With The Heart. A Gentle Guide for Discerning God's Will for Your Life.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2003; Lon Fendall, Jan Wood, Bruce Bishop, *Practicing Discernment Together. Finding God's Way Forward in Decision Making.* Newberg, Oregon: Barclay Press, 2007; Celia Allison Hahn, *Uncovering your Church's Hidden Spirit.* Bethesda, Maryland: The Alban Institute, 2001; Stefan Kiechle, *The Art of Discernment. Making Good Decisions in your World of Choices.* Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 2005; Elizabeth Liebert, *The Way of Discernment. Spiritual Practices for Decision Making.* Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008; David Lonsdale, *Dance to the Music of the Spirit. The Art of Discernment.* London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992; Patricia Loring, *Listening Spirituality. Corporate Spiritual Practice Among Friends.* Volume II. Washington Grove, Maryland: Openings Press, 1999; Gaylord Noyce, *Church Meetings that work.* Washington: The Alban Institute, 1994; Charles M. Olsen, Danny E. Morris, *Discerning God's Will Together. A Spiritual Practice for the Church.* Bethesda, Maryland: The Alban Institute, 1997; Valerie K. Isenhower, Judith A. Todd, *Living into the Answers. A Workbook for Personal Spiritual Discernment.* Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2008; Pierre Wolff, *Discernment. The Art of Choosing Well.* Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph, 2003; N. Graham Standish, *Humble Leadership. Being Radically Open To God's Guidance And Grace.* Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2007; Gary A. Shockley, *The Meandering Way. Leading by Following the Spirit.* Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2007.

41   P.B. Overland identifies 5 different words for "wisdom": "*hokma* ["wisdom"], *bina* ["insight"], *esa* ["counsel"], *orma* ["prudence"], and *ta'am* ["discernment"] that appear in tandem with wisdom events, such as proverbs, fables, parables, counsel or dramatic ruse." In: Overland, P.B. 'WISDOM'. 984–989. In: *Dictionary Of The Old Testament: Historical Books.* Bill T. Arnold, H.G.M. Williamson, (eds.), Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press; Downers Grove: Illinois, 2005, 984.

The field of Spirituality

The academic field that would be most committed to making the themes of this kind of contemporary spiritual wisdom literature subject to academic investigations is the emerging field of Spirituality. Much has changed since the seventeenth century definition of spirituality that emphasised the "independence of the body;" and concentrated on "pure acts of the soul" or "mental refinement". Those were the days when the focus of the study of spirituality was on the juxtaposition of the spiritual and the material, and on the "excess of striving after the purely immaterial".[42] The Roman Catholic publications, *History of Christian Spirituality*, published in 1922 and the *Dictionnaire de la Spiritualite*, published in 1932, moved away from the excessive other worldly, body negating perspective of the past and began to treat spirituality as integral part of ascetic and mystical theologies, thoroughly anchored in dogmatic and moral theology.[43] During the sixties and seventies, definitions of spirituality remained vague and at best displayed ingenious simplicity, as Geoffrey Wainwright's attempt demonstrates defining spirituality as "the combination of praying and living …".[44] Wainwright's words echo the ancient Benedictine rule of 'ora et labora'.

In recent times Philip Sheldrake defined spirituality more broadly as

> the whole of human life viewed in terms of a conscious relationship with God, in Jesus
>
> Christ, through the indwelling of the Spirit and within the community of believers.[45]

The central focus in investigating spirituality is on the 'conscious relationship with God', 'indwelling of the Spirit', and 'community of believers'. What qualifies Spirituality as a field in its own right, is its address of knowledge gained from spiritual experience. Sheldrake distinguishes knowledge obtained through rational reflection from that which comes through experiential knowledge and notes that

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42   Geoffrey Wainwright, 'Types of Spirituality'. 592–605. In: Cheslyn P. Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold, (eds.), *The Study of Spirituality*. London: SPCK, 1986, xxiv

43   Ibid., xxv.

44   Wainwright, *The Study of Spirituality*. 592 and 605.

45   Philip A. Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology. Christian Living and the Doctrine of God*. London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1998, 35.

[t]he writings of the great mystics introduce a *way* of knowing that is different from the way offered by the traditional theological method. It is a way of knowledge that arises from participation and love rather than something that depends on purely rational inquiry."[46]

Although the literature that underscores a significant part of this thesis is not mystical in nature, it delivers valuable procedural and theological knowledge grounded in participation in corporate discernment and in love, that is love of God, the church, self and others. By "love" I do not mean a positive emotional closeness but a state of connection or relationship that is shaped by a significant measure of loving acceptance and knowing of one another, both in human-to-human and divine-human relationships. The significance of "love" as a contributing factor in the field of spirituality recognises spirituality as a profoundly relational reality that encompasses practices and concepts alike. For the context of this exploration of communal discernment, the kind of knowledge that arises from participation and love is placed into the domain of the work of the Spirit.

The field of Practical Theology

The field that has the hermeneutic capacity to integrate the pneumatological, ecclesiological and missiological dimensions of this investigation into discernment, is the field of practical theology. Practical theology in the 21st century is concerned with the way that Christian practice of faith and underpinning beliefs intersect and interact with one another. Rather than receiving a theological framework and methodology from the discipline of systematic theology from which to extend specific practices or actions as practical application of theological principles,[47] contemporary practical theology has moved towards creating "understandings that focus on the actions of the church in the world."[48] Practical Theology in this vein formulates theology in

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46   Ibid., 100.

47   This approach was characteristic for the early modern understanding of Practical Theology following Schleiermacher's *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology (1810 and 1830)* which kept a stranglehold on Protestant Pastoral theology and pastoral practice in the Anglo-Saxon realm until the publication of Seward Hiltner's *Preface To Pastoral Theology* in 1958, in which he integrated Tillich's correlational method into his approach to pastoral care and communication. In doing so he attributed theory generating qualities to the field of practical theology itself.

48   John Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person. Friendship and the Care of People With Mental Health Problems.* Nashville: Abingdon, 2000, 11.

reflection on practice and seeks to reshape practice in light of such theological reflection. In the partnership of mutual influence theology and practice each distil and expand a praxis oriented theology that is enriched and informed by an active conversation with normative Christian sources and other disciplines from the fields of the sciences, arts and humanities. From these conversations challenges, critique and affirmation for practice emerge, but praxis also challenges, critiques and affirms the authoritative sources, calling for new formulations of faith that arise from missional practices. As Duncan Forrester has put it,

> Practical theology is that branch of theology that is concerned with questions of truth in relation to action. This points to a deep reciprocity between theory and practice, whereby theological understanding not only leads to action, but also arises out of practice, involvement in the life of the world: "He who does what is true comes to the light." Practical theology is therefore concerned with the doing of the truth and with the encounter with truth and action.[49]

By being partners in reflection and action, generating new theological responses to faithful practice, the two continuously invigorate each other to be life giving and authentic expressions of the church's proclamation of the gospel. In this way practical theology assists the Church in working through the complex questions related to the changing shape of its mission and ministry practice. When communal discernment is investigated through the lens of practical theology, it appears as a living practice, while at the same time expressing faith-filled beliefs in relation to God's concrete incarnational involvement with the life of the church. It brings to the fore the Spirit's participation in discernment and highlights the significant role of relationships as part of the communal discernment process. A framework that acknowledges the integrated interdependent relationship of practice and theology allows for the investigation of communal discernment practices in their ecclesiological, missiological and pneumatological implications, providing a methodological, theological and practical context for a coherent exploration.

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49   Duncan B. Forrester, *Theology & Practice.* Epworth Press: London, 1996, 83. In: Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person,* 11.

The chapter structure of the thesis

The overall direction of thought in this thesis moves from the notable rise of discernment in the life of the Church today, to specific models and their key elements, signifying a move from the general to the specific in terms of communal discernment. The investigation then turns to the roots of discernment in the scriptures and in specific Christian settings and faith traditions, moving from the beginnings forward to the present.

Chapter 1 starts with an investigation of the driving interests that have prompted the rise of communal discernment in a variety of contexts in the life of the Church. The examination of the literature will show that doing business in a church context has called for greater congruence between faith and business procedures and that communal discernment became prominent as part of the Church's desire to revitalise the life and mission of its local congregations. Chapter 2 follows with a detailed exploration of contemporary models of communal discernment examining sequences and stages as they have emerged from a number of different spiritual settings. Chapter 3 moves deeper into the interactive microcosm of the communal discernment process by investigating the key practices of discernment and by naming the obstacles to an effective process of communal discernment. The review of the contemporary landscape is then followed by a historic sweep of communal discernment practices, beginning with the scriptures (chapter 4), moving to the emergence of spiritual direction in desert and monastic contexts (chapter 5), then proceeding to an exploration of the Ignatian tradition (chapter 6), from there to the Reformed tradition (chapter 7) and to elements of discernment in Wesleyan and Pietist traditions (chapter 8). Chapter 9 turns to the discernment practices of the Friends concluding with a discussion of Friends' contemporary discernment and decision making. This brings the investigation back into the present. Chapter 10 veers slightly from the path of exploring spiritual discernment practices by presenting a secular model of consensus building which emerged from grass roots community activism, elements of which were picked up and integrated into a spiritual approach to decision making by the Uniting Church in Australia (chapter 11). In a sense, chapter 10 functions as a back drop to chapter 11. Chapter 12 concludes with a synopsis of communal discernment practices and their contribution to the overall picture of this practice

in the life of the Church. The questions posed by the approach to mutual ecclesial learning, how can other traditions enrich our own practice, or what is the gift that we can receive from other traditions, will then be answered.

Delineation

Due to the confines of this thesis, Pentecostal-charismatic and indigenous approaches to communal spiritual discernment in nations or tribes outside of the Western paradigm have not been given special consideration. This is not a sign of disinterest or disregard for the significant contributions that both of these realms would have made to this inquiry. Western communal discernment traditions merely represent the personal starting point of this author's thinking, a recognition of her own roots in the West and a desire to understand these roots more completely before venturing further afield. I will now turn to the first chapter of this thesis, which will provide an introduction into the driving interests in rediscovering communal discernment in the life of the Church.

Chapter 1. The driving interests toward communal discernment in the contemporary landscape of the Church

In this chapter I will illustrate a rising interest in communal discernment across a number of different Protestant denominations. The shift from managing the Church's affairs with secular rules of decision making to bringing spiritual practices into board meetings signifies a shift in emphasis from task orientation to spiritual formation in decision making. This indicates the desire of many churches to put process before outcomes and relationships of integrity before results.

There has been an upsurge in interest in communal discernment during the past decade in the life of the Church across denominations as the following examples shall demonstrate. Some of these practices have been in use in their respective traditions for decades, if not centuries. However, they are currently recognized more publicly as valuable models for learning about decision making. Other practices have been developed more recently from secular and spiritual sources, for example, the Manual for Meetings of the Uniting Church in Australia.

An example from the Mennonite Tradition

The Mennonite Church of America has always given a prominent place to the role of discernment in the life of its church.[50] But in recent years it has renewed its commitment to spiritual discernment as part of its decision making. The Mennonite Church is known as a 'Historic Peace Church', a name that signifies its commitment to pacifism, non-violence and resistance toward evil. It originated in Switzerland and the regions of the Lower Rhine during the time of the Reformation. Waves of migrants travelled to America in the sixteen hundreds and began settlement in Pennsylvania. In its relationship to the outside world it shows a peculiar dichotomy between strict compliance with the rules and law of the secular world and a radical

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50   See article 'Mennonite Church' in *Global Anabaptist and Mennonite Encyclopedia Online.* At: http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/M46610ME.html Accessed 26/01/2011.

resistance to participating in any violent acts or public offices that employ violence in any form. Avoiding court actions and bearing abuse are understood as a necessary expression of the ethos of 'turning the other cheek' recognised as an essential part of bearing the marks of true discipleship.

Historically, the Mennonites understand themselves as heirs of the Anabaptist tradition, which claims a doctrinal continuity with the Schleitheim and Dordrecht confessions. The Mennonite church, much like other Protestant denominations, from its inception, underwent an ongoing process of internal schisms, re-unifications and fresh articulations of creedal statements for the modern era. The Mennonite Church of America committed itself to two more recent confessions that were to complement each other. Both of these confessions provide some insight into the issue of communal discernment. Article 16 of the Mennonite Statement of Faith of 1995 of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church, entitled 'Leadership' states:

> In making decisions, whether to choose leaders or resolve issues, members of the church listen and speak in a spirit of prayerful openness, with the Scriptures as the constant guide. Persons shall expect not only affirmation, but also correction. In a process of discernment, it is better to wait patiently for a word from the Lord leading toward consensus, than to make hasty decisions.[51]

Article 16 locates discernment as a communal effort into the practice of the church's decision making, specifically, in the process of choosing leaders or in "resolving issues," controversial or otherwise. "Listening and speaking in a spirit of prayerful openness" are placed at the centre of a shared discerning. Participants engage in a "dual orientation," towards God and one another. Thus, listening and speaking is always a multi-directional communicative event. The words spoken and received may directly or between the lines convey something of God or a whisper of the Spirit, if the speakers and listeners have anchored themselves in a place of "prayerful openness". Grounded in the more liberal tradition of the Mennonites, the 1995 confession avoids the use of terms such as "authoritative" or "infallible" in relation to the Scriptures, whereas

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51   The Mennonite Statement of Faith of 1995 of the General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church. Article 16. Leadership, at http://www.mcusa-archives.org/library/resolutions/1995/intro.html Accessed 05/02/2008.

the 1963 confession still emphasises them.[52] The "constant guide of the Scriptures" is followed by the mention of the uncomfortable unpredictability of what may occur – affirmation and correction. The two sit side by side. However, the strong anchoring of the discernment process in the Scriptures indicates continuity with the past. It is clear that discernment is not about being pleasant, it is about a Truth which comes as "a word from the Lord leading toward consensus". It is interesting to note the use of the word 'consensus' which points to a secular grass roots context. An older text may have affirmed something like 'being united in the mind of Christ'. Patience is of the essence and time may be spent in waiting for the right choice. Warning of being too hasty confirms the importance of taking enough time for a good decision to emerge. The pressure of time may distort the outcome. The ethos of this passage is consultative, although it has a sharp edge of uncontrollability, facing the as yet unknown leadership of the Lord. Participants are alerted to the fact that whether their position or question is affirmed or corrected cannot be predicted. Such is the nature of God. The emergence of a discerned consensus requires patient waiting for that divine word that brings a decision or choice to its conclusion.

The following anecdote by Mennonite theologian Marlene Kropf[53] illustrates, that decision making in the Mennonite tradition has not always been as consultative as the 1995 confession suggests. Casting lots as a process of decision making was an ancient forerunner, once regarded as a way of discovering God's binding will for a specific situation. Casting lots in the Mennonite tradition was based on a practice found in scripture. It was first modelled in Acts 1:21–26. The story gives an account of how the eleven remaining disciples choose a successor for Judas, called Matthias. Peter raised the need for this choice and the eleven joined in a process of selection, prayerful preparation and casting of lots. This method of decision making is not repeated at any stage in the New Testament, nor is it reported as a method of decision making before. Yet, it found its place in some Christian communities' decision making, because it seemed to preserve

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52   See the "Preamble" of the 1963 confession which talks about "the full authority of the written Word of God" and Article 2 entitled "Divine Revelation" which adds to this phrase for the context of defining the work of the Holy Spirit: "We accept the Scriptures as the authoritative Word of God, and through the Holy Spirit as the infallible Guide to lead men to faith in Christ and to guide them in the life of Christian discipleship." At: http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/M4663.html Accessed 05/02/2008.

53   Marlene Kropf kindly sent me an unpublished electronic version of a 12 page essay headed *Creating a Climate of Discernment: Prerequisite for Calling*. The paragraphs I am quoting are from page 1. I have omitted one paragraph of personal comments which are not directly relevant to the process of casting lots itself.

an element of unpredictability and uncontrollability that was commonly associated with the influence of the Spirit or the sovereign action of God.

Kropf recalls an event from the year 1950 which occurred in the church of her childhood, the Sheridan Mennonite Church, Oregon. This is how she recalls it:

> The year was 1950. In the Sheridan Mennonite Church (in Oregon), where I grew up, we were about to choose a new minister by casting lots. Two brethren (as we called them) had been selected by the congregation as potential ministers to join the ranks of a team of 6 mostly bi-vocational ministers … When the Sunday arrived for casting lots, the excitement was palpable. Something mysterious, something I had never seen before, what was about to happen. We sang and prayed together. After two hymnals had been placed on the communion table, the two brethren came forward. Then the bishop instructed the candidates, and each chose a hymnbook. Now came the incredible, spell-binding moment. Which man had God chosen to become our minister? Both solemnly opened their hymnbooks. One of them, a tall, lanky, gentle man, found a slip of paper in his hymnbook, on which was written: "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord." (Proverbs 16:33, KJV). We all breathed again. The congregation seemed pleased with the choice, and before long, the new minister was taking his turn in the rotation of preaching for Sunday morning and Sunday evening services.

Kropf's story begins with a recognition of the congregation to find a new leader. The process occurs in a traditional and ritualised process which takes place in the public eye. The congregation witnesses the event of divine action without participating in the process of choosing directly. Communal singing and praying sets the stage, followed by the laying out of two hymnals on the communion table by the bishop. The bishop is the key figure in the "casting" aspect. He leads and conducts the process. Does the congregation have a role besides being a passive audience? Does the bishop know which book contains the positive affirmation? What kind of deliberation process did the bishop undergo prior to the public event? Who chose the two young men? Why were they chosen? None of these questions are answered

in Kropf's account. Two men have made themselves available to be called to ministry. One is chosen, the other is rejected. The affirmative result is framed by a verse from Proverbs which both congratulates the winner and immediately puts him in his place. He is reminded that accepting this call begins and ends with God. The strength in confidence that affirms God's active involvement in this process of choosing a leader is palpable and typical for an earlier time. The 1995 confession avoids the assertion of God's indisputable action. It focuses the attention of the congregation on being guided by the Scriptures, by waiting, listening and receiving guidance from God. Trusting the process has taken the lead over leaning on the absolute character of the divinely decreed outcome.

The influence of the Friends

Because Friends' discernment practices will be addressed in a full chapter, the influence of the Friends in teaching other denominations about discernment in decision making will only be briefly mentioned here. Friends have developed and preserved a practice of communal discernment that is firmly anchored in their practice of worship. It is interesting to note that in recent years, Friend's discernment practices, both from the context of business and the context of "clearness committees" have become more widely known, especially through Friends' participation in the World Council of Churches[54], through the writings of Parker Palmer,[55] and more recently through a chapter in Elisabeth Liebert's book *Way of Discernment*.[56]

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54   See especially the writings of Eden Grace, already referred to, who was a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches around 1998. http://www.edengrace.org/index.shtml Accessed 26/08/2010.

55   See Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known. Education As A Spiritual Journey*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1983 and 1993; *Courage to Teach. Exploring The Inner Landscape Of A Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers, 1998; *Let Your Life Speak. Listening For the Voice of Vocation*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, A Wiley Imprint, 2000, chapter III; and *A Hidden Wholeness. The Journey Toward An Undivided Life. Welcoming the Soul and Weaving Community in a Wounded World*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass. A Wiley Imprint, 2004, 134–147.

56   Elizabeth Liebert. *Way of Discernment. Spiritual Practices for Decision Making*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, chapter 5.

Two interests that drive the emergence of communal discernment

The increased attention to the practice of communal discernment has been driven across the denominational spectrum by four different agendas which will be discussed in detail now. The two interests are:

Interest 1: to create congruence between faith and conducting business;

Interest 2: to engage communal discernment as a pathway to revitalising the local congregation.

Interest 1: to create congruence between faith and conducting business

It is a striking fact that for the first time in at least two hundred years churches across a number of Protestant denominations are critically reconsidering the secular tools which they have come to use in deciding their churches' affairs. Dan Hotchkiss reports that originally all Christian communities borrowed their organisational structures and governing procedures from the world that surrounded them without questioning this practice. He describes how

the early church was organized like a Hellenistic mystery cult, the medieval church resembled monarchy, New England Puritans cloned the structure of an English town. The most important influences on the structure of the contemporary American church or synagogue date from the 19th century, when the nonprofit corporation emerged as an all-purpose container for benevolent work. But while other nonprofits have changed, too many congregations still live in the Victorian world of Robert's Rules.[57]

The term "Robert's Rules" is short for a set of rules of order and debate devised in the United States by General Henry Martyn Robert.[58] Robert had been frustrated with the degree of disturbance and chaos that had arisen during the business meetings of his local Baptist Church.

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57   Dan Hotchkiss.' A Discerner's Guide to Congregational Governance.' In: *Congregations*, 2007–04–01 Spring 2007, Number 2. http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?q=printme&id=3966 Accessed 26/01/2010. Henry M. Robert, *Robert's Rules of Order and Debate*. New and Enlarged 10th edition. Sara Corbin Robert, Henry M. Robert III, William J. Evans, Daniel H. Honemann, Thomas J. Balch, (eds.), Perseus Publishing, 2000. It contains the procedures for running business meetings based on the Westminster Parliamentary rules, first edition 1876.

58   Danny E. Morris, Charles M. Olsen. *Discerning God's Will Together. A Spiritual Practice for the Church*. Bethesda, Maryland: Alban Publications, 1997, 35. For a short history see also http://www.robertsrules.com/history.html Accessed 28/08/2010.

He took charge of the disorderly conduct by drafting a set of rules based on Thomas Jefferson's rules for the United States Congress and later expanded his first draft based on the rules of the Westminster system of Parliamentary debate.

Methodist pastor Danny E. Morris[59] published the first contribution to discernment and decision making in 1991. In his workbook for church councils he suggested a simple distinction between "what needs to be decided" and "what needs to be *spiritually discerned*", insisting that "*[s]piritual discernment would be needed to deal with spiritual matters*" and that spiritual matters had to be resolved through a consensus process rather than the use of any form of voting.[60] Instead of replacing Robert's Rules with an alternative set of procedures, Morris offered an alternative mode of decision making that could be used parallel to the 'official' procedures.

A similar practice of the parallel use of different sets of procedures is found in Presbyterian theologian Josef M. Driskill's book,[61] entitled *Protestant Spiritual Exercises*, published in 1999, in which he noted that mainline Protestant denominations were considering significant changes in their decision making practices. He observed that "Robert's Rules of Order" which represented "a system of organizational maneuvers designed to maintain the control of the chair," were increasingly complemented by "quiet spaces for reflection on the movement on the Spirit".[62] Presbyterian minister Victoria Grace Curtis assembled a table based on anecdotal evidence providing a snapshot of the way in which communal discernment and Robert's Rules could coexist by complementing each other[63]:

59   Danny E. Morris, *Yearning to Know God's Will. A Workbook for Discerning God's Guidance for Your Life.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991, 116 ff.

60   Ibid., 106.

61   Josef M. Driskill, *Protestant Spiritual Exercises. Theology History and Practice*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999, 45.

62   Ibid., 46.

63   Victoria Grace Curtis, 'Discernment and Decision Making.' 1–22.
      http://oga.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/resources/discernment_and_decision_making.pdf Accessed 02/11/2010.

Parliamentary procedure is helpful when	Communal discernment is helpful when
dealing with routine organizational business; an issue has near or full consensus	dealing with significant matters that affect the whole body a sizable minority or range of views is present
clear alternatives have been identified and further discussion is not likely to surface more options	more voices or ideas need to be included
delaying a decision is not an option participants are comfortable with parliamentary procedure	time can be taken to explore more options and build consensus
the group is willing to accept majority rule when a common solution cannot be found	a diversity of cultural backgrounds is present; persistent and substantial division exists

Table 1

In this table Curtis lists four instances that could call for a change of tracks, from the rules of formal decision making to a more informal process of discernment: 1. The existence of a significant majority which may not concur with a current decision; 2. a commitment to inclusivity; 3. the need to take more time to build consensus; and 4. to hold off on a final decision due to pervasive disagreement on account of cultural differences. Honouring dissenting majorities, being inclusive, taking time and putting respect for cultural differences before making a final decision, these are factors that indicate a change in what is valued in a decision making process. The completion of the agenda and the fulfilment of tasks through majority rule is re-prioritised in light of the need to honour and include a diversity of views. How decisions are arrived at is more important than the decision itself. The relational climate matters more than having obtained a majority vote. The Mennonites' ethos of not being hasty resonates through Curtis' observation that "time is taken to explore more options and build consensus."

In his book, entitled *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders*[64], another Presbyterian minister and church consultant, Charles M. Olsen, made a case for the integration of spirituality and administration in the work of church councils. He suggested a process that included "prayerful discernment, story telling, biblical and theological reflection,

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64   Quoted in Danny E. Morris, Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together. A Spiritual Practice for the Church*. Bethesda, Maryland: Alban Publications, 1997, 17f.

and vision." Together with Ellen Morseth, Olsen published a second title on the same subject five years later, headed *Selecting Church Leaders. A Practice in Spiritual Discernment.* The book's preface is written as a fictitious address to readers envisioned as those charged with selecting church leaders. The authors ask:

> Will you seek to satisfy the immediate and obvious needs of the organization with your choice? Or will you engage patiently in the process of coming to a shared vision of the faith community's long-term needs and opportunities? Will you automatically fill the leadership slots on the church's organizational chart? Or will you ask hard questions about what structure the church actually needs to accomplish its ministry in accord with God's call and leading? Once you have closed on a selection, will you put a "hard sell" on the chosen person to convince the selectee of the selectors' wisdom? Or will you engage the selectee in a thorough exploration of her or his gifts and calling for this expression of ministry?[65]

The themes of this paragraph strongly echo the right column of Curtis' summary. Patience is valued over task orientation, taking the time to explore a church's or person's vocation is rated more highly than performing routine interview procedures. Olsen's and Morseth's approach to communal discernment advocates a gradual grass roots change. They want to see communal discernment inserted into church councils that are grappling with staffing, financial challenges and other resource shortages. Spiritual discernment is promoted as an opportunity to exercise a deeper awareness of the Spirit's involvement in the practical aspects of the life of the congregation. The authors state:

> In spiritual discernment we seek to bring God's ways and our ways into congruence. Seeming good to the Spirit and seeming good to us come together after a patient, prayerful process and faithful engagement in a set of practices. We will want to embrace those spiritual practices that open us to the mystery and presence of God: attending to the witness of scripture, quieting ourselves in solitude and silence, relinquishing ego and the need to prevail, and offering ourselves in worship.[66]

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65   Charles M. Olsen, Ellen Morseth. *Selecting Church Leaders. A Practice in Spiritual Discernment.* Nashville: Upper Room, 2002, 5.
66   Ibid., 13.

There is a widening of themes in this description of the elements of discerning practices. Reference is made to Acts 15:28, the conclusion of the council of Jerusalem, where a complex dispute was resolved peacefully. The authors want to see a newly discerned alignment between the ways of God and the ways of the members of a council of the church. A series of contemplative practices is listed whose aim it is to allow for a deeper entering into "the mystery and presence of God". The members of the business committee are invited to become attuned to a spiritual experience. The sense of time changes. Patience rather than haste frames the meeting. Silence, waiting and praying are envisioned as part of the decision making process. Even the laying down of any investment in personal interests or power is mentioned. The boundaries between secular administrative actions and sacred, faith-based, prayerful consideration have become blurred. The business meeting is becoming an arena for spiritual formational practices. The property and finance committee or the human resource council is transformed into a meeting seeking spiritual direction.[67] In Olsen's and Morseth's mind, doing business as a spiritual practice cannot be conceived of without a deepening of authentic relationships, firstly with God and, as a flow on effect, also with one another.

The move to integrate more fully what was previously regarded as 'secular business' with the activities of communal formation for discernment, is a significant change in the life of the church. To take time to enter into God's presence; to be patient enough to arrive at a fuller understanding and acceptance of each other's differences and to be inclusive of dissenting voices – these are some of the motivations that have lead to the introduction of discernment as parallel track to the use of Robert's Rules.

Interest 2: to engage communal discernment as a pathway to revitalising the local congregation

The second interest in communal spiritual discernment concerns its retrieval as a congregational practice in service of a revitalising the life of the Church and, locally, the mission of the

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67   See also the following websites which highlight the aspect of spiritual formation and worship as part of work and management and are also part of Charles Olsens' work. At: http://www.worshipfulwork.org/ and http://www.worshipfulwork.org/discernment.html Accessed 26/08/2010.

congregation.[68] In her book *Christianity for the Rest of Us*,[69] Diana Butler Bass published

the result of a research project conducted with 50 congregations from 6 Protestant mainline

churches that she undertook together with Joseph Stewart-Sicking between 2002 and 2005. The

purpose of the investigation was to ascertain the reasons for a spiritual revitalisation in mainline

churches, focussing on "practicing congregations". For the purpose of their research project, a

"practicing congregation" was defined as "a congregation which has experienced renewed vitality

through intentionally and creatively embracing one or more traditional Christian practices."[70]

The list of congregational practices that fit the criteria included

> classical spiritual disciplines (such as centring prayer, spiritual direction, or following a
> monastic rule), congregational leadership practices, (such as preaching, stewardship,
> forming children in faith, worship, and shared ministry), and moral, theological,
> and ethical practices (such as forgiveness, hospitality, dying well, discernment,
> peacemaking, and healing).[71]

Vitality was to be assessed not merely by proof of numerical growth but in terms of three

markers: "coherence of practice, authenticity of practices, and transformation through practice."[72]

Coherence related to the way in which a practice surfaced on all levels and in all kinds of contexts

of the congregation's life. It was present when a permeating presence of a practice in language,

prayers and conversations among members could be observed. Authenticity was noticed in a

similar way, when, for example, the culture, identity and vocation of the congregation reflected a

pervading ownership of a practice. Transformation was assessed through "evidence of change in

the lives of individuals".[73] Butler Bass highlights that next to hospitality, "discernment was one of

the most widely spread practices".[74] This indicates the central importance of discernment for the

missional momentum of churches that experience a revitalising through Christian practices.

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68   What follows is a summary of some of the concepts articulated in the essay written by Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass entitled: 'A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices.' 13–32. In: Miroslav Volf, Dorothy C. Bass, (eds.), *Practicing Theology. Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life.* William Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK, 2002.

69   Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us. How the Neighbourhood church Is Transforming the Faith.* New York: HarperOne, of HarperCollins Publishers, 2006.

70   Ibid., 296.

71   Ibid., 296.

72   Ibid., 297.

73   Ibid., 297.

74   Ibid., 91.

Butler-Bass describes discernment as a Christian practice as follows:

> Christians believe that human beings have the capacity to hear, see, touch, and feel
> God – a genuine sensing of truth and beauty through which we know God and know
> God's will. Christians call this discernment. Some Christians depict this capacity as a
> supernatural gift, a miraculous directive, or an extraordinary mystical experience. …
> But Christian tradition points toward something more mundane: discernment as a
> practice that can be developed through participation in reflection, questions, prayer
> and community. … Discernment is a gift to the whole Christian community, one that
> can be strengthened and nurtured by engaging in the practice. Discernment serves as
> a kind of spiritual compass, helping us negotiate the unfamiliar territory of our truest
> selves as we seek to find meaning in God's call.[75]

If a practice is something a person or community engages in repeatedly for the purpose of learning the behaviours or bodies of knowledge associated with it, then the practical elements pertaining to discernment help the practitioner to become more and more acquainted with living in the proximity of God's presence and sensing the directives that issue from it. Removing the practice of discernment from the realm of the extraordinary normalises it as potential part of every Christian's life. A person who seeks discernment practices discernment. And a person who practices discernment will end up with actions that are based on a tentatively discerned outcome.

Butler Bass does not define communal discernment with sharp edges, but she conceives of it in distinction from "some sort of secular 'weighing the plusses and minuses'" as "serious reflection on scripture, grounded in prayer and informed by experience",[76] or as "the way in which Christians talk about deciding on a course of action that they believe is grounded in God's will and that will help realize the reign of God. It is closely related to theological reflection but goes beyond reflection to decision making".[77] Discernment understood as theological reflection adds a new element, namely the intentional interpretation of scriptures for praxis and any other

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75   Ibid., 91.

76   Bass, *Practicing Congregation*, 92.

77   Ibid., 93.

intentional connections between faith and practice. There is a new sense of urgency around the practice of discernment that suggests an increasing desire by congregations not merely to do something, but to do something that is aligned with the will and the Reign of God.

In this chapter I have highlighted a number of salient developments that indicate an increased awareness of communal discernment practices as viable alternatives to the 19th century procedures known as Robert's Rules. Robert's Rules operated in an adversarial, argumentative mode and led to majority votes which inevitably excluded minorities of members from wholeheartedly supporting an outcome. The process of shared discernment invites prayer, reflection on the Scriptures, silence, waiting and laying down personal interests. It points to a fundamental reorientation of the goals for a meeting. In a small group of Christians seeking to find a way forward Robert's Rules may well be completely discarded and the entire process might be guided by elements of discernment. As part of the commitment to discernment the relationship with God takes the highest priority, immediately followed by exploring difference, being inclusive of many voices and being open to bearing the uncomfortable voices. Furthermore, the quality of the relationships between the decision makers, as Curtis' approach suggested, is becoming as important as the relationship with God itself. The fact that contemplative practices and virtues, such as patience, silence and waiting are included, together with the fact that enough time is given to finding the right decision mark a formational commitment to discipleship, not only outside of meetings but especially during a meeting. As part of this development the boundaries between secular administration and spiritual practice are perforated and communal discernment is potentially becoming a catalyst for transformation.

In the next chapter I will offer a closer look at the micro structures of models and practices of communal discernment so as to bring some clarity about the sequence in steps of a number of different models. Chapter 2 will help to clarify the relationship between structured and unstructured processes of communal discernment and it will illustrate a variety of aims and sequence in this process.

Chapter 2. Contemporary Models of Communal Discernment

In the previous chapter some of the motivations that brought communal discernment to prominence in the life of the church have been named. The shift from a purely administrative to a spiritual formational approach to decision making has been explained. And the shift from task and outcome orientation to relationship building came to the fore. I have shown that the relationship with God and with one another have become instrumental in arriving at decisions that were previously a matter for discussion followed by a vote. The notion of 'consensus building' suggests a striving for unanimity in decision making rather than creating a satisfied majority/dissatisfied minority scenario. This chapter will embark on the exploration of models of communal discernment in contemporary practice and their specific building blocks. I will especially attend to the ways in which prayer, the work of the Spirit and the significance of inclusive relationships are addressed in decision making.

Motives for initiating a communal discernment process

Motives for the initiation of a discernment process may vary from denomination to denomination. Sometimes discerning questions are posed on behalf of the community by the incoming pastor or priest in an attempt to discern in which direction to move the congregation's ministry.[78] At other times matters for discernment are raised by the chairperson of a church council or business committee in relation to questions of staffing, project developments or of how to distribute the budget.[79] A pastor or lay leader may be inclined to bring their congregation to a new level of engagement with its mission and ministry.[80] A small group of

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78   Denham Grierson refers to this context in *Transforming God's People.* Melbourne: The Joint Board of Christian Education Australia and New Zealand, 1984, 15 and N. Graham Standish, 'Paying Attention to God. Divine Coincidences.' 17–34. In: Diana Butler Bass and Joseph Stewart-Sickering, (eds.), *From Nomads to Pilgrims. Stories from Practicing Congregations.* Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006, in particular on 17, 18.

79   See N. Graham Standish, ibid., especially 20ff; Charles M. Olsen and Ellen Morseth, *Selecting Church Leaders. A Practice in Spiritual Discernment.* Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2002, 16 and 157–180.

80   Nancy E. Bedford tells a story involving a small Christian community in Buenos Aires which makes this point, entitled 'Little Moves Against Destructiveness: Theology and the Practice of Discernment.' 157–181. In: Miroslav Volf, Dorothy C. Bass, (eds.), *Practicing Theology. Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life.* William Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan, Cambridge UK, 2002, see in particular 165ff.

faithful people may have gathered to help one person to discern their vocation,[81] the nature of a marital commitment,[82] or the movements of God's Spirit in their personal life.[83] In the midst of these diverse motivations a number of different models are used, depending on the size of a congregation and the issue that requires resolution.

Models of communal discernment

Suzanne Farnham et al. developed the *Listening Hearts* ministry as part of the *Christian Vocation Project*. The intention of this project is to provide the Church with an effective resource that will guide small groups in their joint discernment. The small size of the discerning group and the focus on vocational discernment shapes the authors' approach in a particular way. Farnham et al. describe the defining features of the process as shaped by the commitment as

> living the life of the Spirit; … [which is] a process of growth involving an ever greater integration of desires, feelings, reactions, and choices with a continuing commitment to abide in Christ. Indeed, through integrating the actions and relationships of life into one's identity with Christ we come to feel whether various impulses move us toward or away from the Spirit.[84]

The commitment to integration or a sense of wholeness is immediately obvious. An openness to the Spirit in day to day living is to permeate every aspect of a person's inner life and sense of calling. The authors are not so much interested in creating a framework of rules to which discerning groups adhere, but they want to see the discernment process embedded into a way of life that shows "a continuing commitment to abide in Christ." Dispelling the myth that discernment will provide the seekers with some sort of certainty, Farnham et al. alert their readers to the possibility that

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81   See Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, Susan M. Ward, *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*. Newly revised version. Ridgefield, Conn.: Morehouse Publishing, 2003. Also see a description of the work of a "Clearness Committee" in Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak. Listening For the Voice of Vocation*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000, 37–55.

82   See for example the procedures for a "Meeting for Clearness" in *Handbook of Practice and Procedure*. The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Australia Incorporated. Draft for Standing Committee July 2004, 5th edition, section 10.5 at http://www.quakers.org.au/files/handbook_5th_ed/Handbook_5th%20Ed_2005%20copy.pdf Accessed 01/25/2008.

83   See Rose Mary Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction. Community for Discernment*. New York, Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1995.

84   Suzanne Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, Susan M. Ward. *Listening Hearts. Discerning God's Call in Community*. Newly Revised Edition with Newly Formulated Guidelines for Discernment. Harrisburgh, PA,: Morehouse Publishing, 1991, 25.

we move … into the darkness of God where we must act in faith rather than certainty. In discernment we move beyond our feelings, our thoughts and our reasoning about what God wants of us, to be led by God's Spirit toward action. … Ultimately discernment requires our willingness to act in faith on our sense of what God wants us to do. [It] does not imply fully comprehending God's will, but rather it raises the question, What is the next step God wants me to take?[85]

The insistence on action takes the discernment process away from the suspicion that it is a purely internal affair. The engagement with God's Spirit and God's leading may take the seeker to actions, however, they may not have planned. Fully understanding God's leading is not as important as acting in faith. In a later publication Farnham et al. define spiritual discernment as "a prayerful, informed, and intentional effort to distinguish God's voice from other voices that influence us."[86]

In place of a stage model the authors outline a number of qualities, skills and attitudes which specify a particular way of being and relating. They propose a posture of trust, humility and patience and the ability to listen to others and to God, engage with the scriptures and remain on target without becoming too caught up in the 'correctness' of the discernment process. This is the list:

- Trust

- Listening

- Listening Prayer

- Knowledge of Scriptures

- Humility

- Discipline and Perseverance

- Patience and Urgency

- Perspective (not idolising discernment)[87]

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85 Ibid., 27 and 57.

86 This is an expanded version of *Listening Hearts* published in 1991 which adds processes that relate to discernment in groups. Suzanne G. Farnham, Stephanie A. Hull, and R. Taylor McLean. *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts. Discernment for Group Deliberations.* Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1996, 1.

87 Farnham, *Listening Hearts*, 30–35.

Describing a more informal and unstructured discerning environment which gains momentum from a person's ongoing spiritual growth and day to day spiritual practices has its strength in aiming for integration. Instead of setting the small group discernment up as a special event with different features than those that are part of a person's day to day living, it seeks continuity with daily life spiritual practices. Vocational discernment in this vein signifies an intensification of already existing habits. This may work well when the focus is on one person's question of vocation. However, when the discernment needs of larger groups are to be considered a different approach becomes necessary.

Thomas G. Bandy has written for larger churches interested in creating conditions for a thriving of their ministry and mission. Accordingly his model moves away from the sphere of informal small group searching towards a more strategic and structured mode. In his well known book *Moving Off The Map*, Bandy recommends that a congregation, passionate about its growth, should firstly consolidate its identity by clarifying its core values, bedrock beliefs, motivating vision and key mission.[88] But because each aspect of a congregation's identity is embedded in the fabric of its faith he suggests a process of communal discernment.[89] However, Bandy's orientation towards leadership chooses to engage with the influential members of a congregation to be able to set the tone for change. Bandy brings an understanding of leadership to the task that he calls *"The Four Depth Dimensions for Spiritual Leadership in the Twenty-First Century."*[90] Bandy names them as *1. The ability to learn and apply new skills; 2. The ability to celebrate wholeness; 3. The ability to discern hope; and 4. The ability to trust God.* In these four dimensions Bandy creates a new minister's profile that he believes will be more conducive to leading a congregation through change. Discernment is firstly exercised by the minister through the third ability, headed, *The ability to discern hope*[91] which consists of the following three skill sets

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88 Thomas G. Bandy, *Moving off the Map. A field Guide to Changing the Congregation*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1998, see table of contents Part III.

89 This necessity does not always take the form of a formal so called "communal spiritual discernment process". But in *Moving off the Map*, Bandy repeatedly invites the teams implementing his suggestions into intentional discernment. See pages 70–71, 141, 160, 209–212.

90 Ibid., 30.

91 Ibid., 30.

3. The ability to discern hope

recognition of hidden potential in persons;

recognition of hidden possibilities in situations;

recognition of hidden resources within oneself.[92]

Bandy stipulates, that the ability to discern hope "is more than optimism that good will triumph in the end. It is the perceptiveness that identifies potential and teases out the fabric of life. It is the ability to shift back and forth from the macro to the micro and to see the smallest detail as a fulcrum that can shift the course of history."[93]

The specially trained leadership group becomes the bearer of the discerned outcomes in terms of congregational change and it falls to them to hold these outcomes up for the congregation's acceptance and enactment. Towards the end of his book Bandy instructs the leadership of the congregation, that from time to time organisational chores must "become secondary to the need to interpret the discernment process over and over again to the congregation in ways that motivate even greater participation."[94] Despite Bandy's intention to the contrary, his advice highlights a potential lack of ownership and participation in terms of acting on discerned outcomes, especially in the context of a large congregation. But sharing discerned outcomes with the congregation as a whole is key to the successful process of revitalising congregational life. Bandy's approach to naming/shaping a congregation's identity and from there determine its mission emphasises that the sense of discernment runs through the entire process which requires the following four steps:

- intentional data collection

- discussions

- prayerful consideration and

- discerning choices.[95]

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92 Ibid., 30.

93 Ibid., 31.

94 Ibid., 211.

95 Ibid., 211.

These four steps reflect a commitment to tasks which can be repeated at every turn of the discussion. The process of profiling a congregation's identity clearly invites participants into a complex discussion process. However it does not acknowledge the importance of the relational environment in which the discerning community moves, nor does it specify a spiritual listening process. Discernment in this vein presents as a carefully prepared decision making process grounded in thorough data collection, extensive weighing of options and finding appropriate actions.

Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, in their book, *Holy Conversations. Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations*, are also equipped to work with large congregations requiring a more formal organisational approach. *Holy Conversations* is a handbook for the ministry professional focused on congregational planning which arose from extensive consultations with congregations seeking change. The authors begin by casting the process of strategic planning as a series of "holy conversations" among the members of a congregation, in which

> people's understanding of their identity as a faith community, their sense of purpose,
> and their relationship with God can be explored by asking the questions,
>
> • Who are we? The identity question.
>
> • What has God called us to do? The Purpose question.
>
> • Who is our neighbour? The contextual question.[96]

The authors want to strike a balance between a clearly structured process of inquiry resulting in the creation of a specific plan and unstructured, open conversations during which a congregation reflects on its unique circumstances, needs and resources. The authors are attempting to strike a balance between formal and informal elements of planning and discernment. To this end they discuss the relationship between strategic planning and spiritual discernment in some depth.[97] By inviting less structured "open planning", the authors hope to make room for "the risk of spiritual discernment", allowing "space and time for the intrusion

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96   Gil Rendle, Alice Mann. *Holy Conversations. Strategic Planning as Spiritual Practice for Congregations.* The Alban Institute, 2003,
        xii and xiv, 3–5.

97   Ibid., xv–xviii, 139–152.

of the hand of God or the movement of the Spirit that might operate outside of the path of the program or work on a different timetable".[98] The description of this fundamental posture of receptivity and openness extends into the following understanding of spiritual discernment as

> the process by which we notice, ponder, and interpret our experience in light of faith. In spiritual discernment, we perceive sacred significance in the current moment and in the winding path by which we have arrived. We listen for the still small voice that beckons us onward, quietly revealing what we are here on earth to do and to become.[99]

The journey of discernment and the occurrence of moments of spiritual insight or recognition play an important role alongside a structured process investigation and decision making. Spiritual discernment is further qualified as a continuing process of faithful discrimination, not a one off event. It can consist in momentary revelatory glimpses which lead to a sense of sacredness or divine presence. The communal process of creating meaning together becomes the conduit for renewal. The process of shared discernment attends systematically to three sets of voices, namely, of "God's desire", "my desire" and "our desire". Individual desires are invited to be made transparent so as to not steer the agenda in a hidden way. The community's desire is carefully collated from a range of interviewing procedures. However, the community's desires are then brought into conversation with God's desire in a communal and personal process of prayer for guidance and illumination: "[we] withdraw to a quiet place and listen for the still, small voice whispering within us. We talk with a spiritual companion about the ways God may be nudging us. We peer through the scriptures as if through a window – squinting to see the outlines of God's life and God's work in the world."[100] In Rendle and Mann's thinking the strategic planning process carries the ongoing challenge of holding together the two movements, (1) being outwardly attentive to and discerning from important contributing voices and sources of information, and (2) being attentive to the internal, personal and spiritual perceptions. Making spaces for informal processes of prayer and listening "to the still small voice" alongside stringent inquiries and intentional interviewing acknowledges the need for both. Only as these

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98   Ibid., xvi.
99   Ibid., 139.
100   Ibid., 143.

two dimensions work together can the strategic planning process claim to be a communal discernment process. The map through the planning process then looks as follows:

- Getting ready:
- Congregational training for planning
- Committee selection and training
- Collecting data:
- Needs assessment which includes external audit, internal audit and learnings
- Shaping the Future
- Mission statement
- Vision
- Objectives, goals, and recommendations
- Board approval and referral
- Action plans and implementation.[101]

If Rendle and Mann had not included the chapter on discernment their program would appear more like an effective strategy for congregational planning. However, having "God's desires, our desires and my desires" in mind, building in 'disruptions' of the strategic process and making room for an informal process which includes noticing 'the sacred significance of the sacred moment' recognises discernment as an integral 'spiritual ingredient' for revitalising the mission of the congregation.

Roy M. Oswald and Robert E. Friedrich add to the approach that seeks to balance a formal strategic approach with informal spaces for discernment for the congregational context. In *Discerning Your Congregation's Future. A Strategic and Spiritual Approach*[102] they start out by declaring that their book is about "helping a congregation to develop a common vision" beginning with "a theology of discernment because the work of strategic planning in the church is at heart about our relationship with God."[103] The chapter outlining the theological foundations establishes a grounding of discernment in the "ongoing presence of Christ in the church and

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101   Ibid.

102   Roy M. Oswald and Robert E. Friedrich. *Discerning Your Congregation's Future. A Strategic and Spiritual Approach.* An Alban Institute Publication, 1998.

103   Ibid., 2.

in his followers … manifest in the Holy Spirit".[104] The acute awareness of each person's limited knowledge of the will of God is accompanied by the recognition that "God's will is disclosed to us that we may follow". The limitations of the communities knowing of God are acknowledged in the attitude, that no discerned outcome is ever final but always "open to further guidance".[105] The process is outlined in the following stages:

- Appoint a task force
- Assess the congregation's ministry
- Reflect on the congregation's history
- Identify the congregation's norms
- Interview key people in the community
- (Optional) Survey the congregational meeting
- Hold a governing board retreat
- Develop a mission statement.[106]

The aim of this sequence is for the congregation to develop a mission statement. The steps do not name any particular informal discernment spaces. The process implies that strategic planning is grounded "in the heart of God". The congregation's history and norms, as well as drawing from the knowledge and understanding of key people are significant sources of information for the design of the desired mission statement.

Church growth consultant and Episcopalian priest Daniel Prechtel in his thesis on spiritual discernment for persons or communities is the first to make the spiritual discernment itself subject to a process.[107] Rather than addressing strategic items in one type of process and discernment in another, Prechtel's model revolves entirely around discernment as a personal or communal process. Genuine discernment requires an intersecting of God's guidance which

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104 Ibid., x.
105 Ibid., xi.
106 Ibid., 9.
107 Daniel Prechtel (2002) *To have the Mind of Christ: Symbol, Guidance and the Development of Christ. Communal Spiritual Discernment Processes for Parish Life, Mission and Ministry*. A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry (Anglican Ministries) 4.
http://llministries.homestead.com/files/To_Have_the_Mind_of_Christ.pdf Accessed 11/09/2010.

comes from beyond the community's reality and an inner work that opens the community's perception to divine guidance. He explains it like this:

> In spiritual discernment we seek God's guidance in a matter of importance … so there is … a sense that the answers or directions have an origin beyond us – a gift of grace that "comes from above." But spiritual discernment also requires a profound inner work of prayerfulness that evokes the guidance of primary symbols which connect the discerning community to the great themes of Christian faith …[108]

Some paragraphs later Prechtel defines discernment as a means "to disclose, uncover, or discriminate between the forces underlying an issue or choice of directions and to seek as much clarity as possible as to what path or direction God would have for the individual or community".[109] His model comprises seven steps centring around a cluster of devotional and contemplative tools, such as prayer, meditation and dreamwork which leads to an awareness of guiding symbols. Prechtel's process is ordered in a circle. The seven stages are:

1. Listening for emerging Issues and Invitation
2. Framing Questions
3. Exploring Possibilities
4. Discovering Direction
5. Testing for Consensus
6. Making a Discernment
7. Evaluating Results.[110]

The stages are meant to unfold sequentially and move around in a clockwise direction. The first stage is placed at the top of the circle. Stages 1–5 can be described as an evolving prayerful conversation honing in on the articulation of an issue or a question. At stage 6 the community or person has received and accepts a binding discerned outcome. The last stage calls for lived experience to be held against the discerned outcome, either confirming or challenging the result. Although the seven stages suggest a reasonably tightly structured process, Prechtel's description

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108   Ibid., 4.
109   Ibid., 9.
110   Ibid., 26.

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of each stage leaves room for informal 'moments', prayer and waiting. Although it can be applied

to larger congregations it carries the atmosphere of a small group context. While Prechtel spends

no time on describing the relational environment, it can be assumed that the elements taken

from contemplative and Friends' traditions would make for a quietly respectful environment.

Danny Morris & Charles Olsen have written extensively about spiritual discernment in relation

to all levels of church government.[111] The authors understand "[d]iscerning God's will [as]

living fully in the profoundly personal and fulfilling relationship with God that God offers us

in Jesus Christ."[112] As part of this work they devised a series of steps that although appearing

in sequence are envisioned as backwards and forwards movements. The description of the ten

steps below was inspired by Jesus' use of imagery from the life of rural labour, making reference

to the 'planting, maturing and harvesting of seed."[113] Selecting seeds, preparing soil and planting,

cultivating plants and harvesting yield are used as metaphors for four stages of discernment.[114]

1. Framing   (selecting an issue)

2. Grounding   (choosing a guiding principle to keep the focus on discernment)

3. Shedding   (practicing indifference toward self interest)

4. Rooting   (grounding the process in Scripture and tradition)

5. Listening   (being open to hear the voice of the Spirit and any other voices)

6. Exploring   (Identify all possible options and alternatives)

7. Improving   (refining the options)

8. Weighing   (asking probing/discerning questions of the options)

9. Closing   (closing in on a new direction and testing for consensus)

10. Resting.   (Is it God's will, nothing less, nothing more, nothing else?)[115]

These movements of prayerful discussion, dialogue and discernment spiral up and down a

vertical axis, also called the "magnetic core" that is "God's Will."[116] In drawing from Ignatian,

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111 Charles M. Olsen, Danny E. Morris, *Discerning God's Will Together. A Spiritual Practice for the Church.* Bethesda, Maryland: The Alban Institute, 1997.

112 Ibid., 46.

113 Ibid., 69.

114 Ibid., 69.

115 Ibid., 66–68.

116 Ibid., 72.

Friends' and other contemplative practices this model makes no secret of the fact that is works in pursuit of a result, however, it does not shy away from the cumbersome, time consuming, 'windy road' of arriving at a God-inspired decision. The ethos of interactions is not specified in relation to the participants. However, under 'listening', provision is made to listen "to one another, to the cries of people in need, and to the Spirit of God",[117] which indicates an inherent concern for the relational environment.

Valerie K. Isenhower and Judith A. Todd[118] have defined discernment as follows:

> Spiritual discernment is about finding God's yearning for the direction to live, … When we engage in spiritual discernment, we continually seek to know God's longing and to accept the invitation to live into the abundance and life God so freely offers.

The authors' model, while inspired by Morris' and Olsen's work places stages of discernment into a circle with God at the centre. Nine smaller circles within the large circle connect with arrows that point in both directions and are directed towards the God-circle.[119] Returning to the relationship with God is the discerning community's practice at every stage. The authors emphasise that they are not advocating a linear movement through nine activities, but a dynamic dance that touches repeatedly on the nine circles which together qualify as a communal discernment process.[120] In no particular order, the nine activities are: centring, remembering and listening, sorting, path building, offering, waiting and resting, implementing, God-centred evaluation, naming and framing.[121] At the end of each stage, a number of questions are processed which redirect the community's attention to God at the centre of the process. The questions that are asked are a way of ascertaining how the process of discernment is progressing: Is what we are deciding bringing us closer to God or does it move us further away from God?[122] "What themes/ideas/needs bring comfort? … What themes/ideas/needs bring a sense of fear or anxiety?" These probing questions have some affinity with the Ignatian way of discernment

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117 Ibid., 80.

118 Valerie K. Isenhower, Judith A. Todd. *Living into the Answers. A Workbook for Personal Spiritual Discernment.* Nashville: Upper Room books, 2008; and *Listening For God's Leading. A Workbook for Corporate Discernment.* Nashville: Upper Room books, 2009.

119 Ibid., 19.

120 Ibid., 18.

121 Ibid., 19.

122 See ibid., 96.

which will be more fully examined in detail in chapter 6. The authors take great care to resource and include each member of the discerning community while inviting each member into a process of ongoing prayerful consideration of the issues at hand. Although the discerning members' relationship with God is given primary attention, what could inhibit the relationship between God and the community is discussed in some detail. The leading discernment team instructs the discernment seeking congregation to sharpen their listening skills, investment in certain outcomes[123] and fear of change[124] is addressed by working on 'holy indifference' and learning to trust in the face of the unknown. Isenhower and Todd offer a process that allows for a thorough investigation in the community's life, ministry and needs for change. Great thought is given to engaging every member in the process of discerning the issues and discovering a deepened authenticity in the relationship with God. Systematic investigation is balanced with informal discussions while the process is carefully tracked and constantly anchored in a sense of God's presence.

The next model is summarised in a table which was collated from anecdotal evidence by Presbyterian minister Victoria G. Curtis, who called it "Forms of Deliberation".[125] The table represents a succinct illustration of three styles of conversation in a community's decision making: debate, dialogue and discernment. Each style corresponds to a participant's state of mind. Debate corresponds with a 'knower's mind', dialogue with a 'learner's mind', and discernment with a 'seeker's mind'.

Curtis' way of relating attributes and conversational behaviours to various forms of deliberation could falsely suggest that these are separate strands, each purely represented in different members of a discerning community, when it is probably more accurate to think of the three strands as potentially present to varying degrees in all members.

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123   Ibid., 59–61.

124   Ibid., 81–82.

125   Victoria Grace Curtiss, 'Discernment and Decision Making.' 1–22. 2005.
       http://oga.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/resources/discernment_and_decision_making.pdf Accessed 20/10/2010, 13.

Forms of Deliberation

Debate	Dialogue	Discernment
One side knows "the truth" and seeks to persuade others to join its way of thinking	Understanding or direction emerges through listening to many or all the voices in the group	A community of believers seeks guidance of the Holy Spirit through prayer; reflection on Scripture, tradition, values, and current realities; dialogue; and finding places of agreement
Defends a viewpoint	Suspends judgment	Offers "holy indifference"
Uses advocacy, persuasion	Balances advocacy with inquiry; explores underlying assumptions, causes, rules	Takes a "long loving look at the real" – contemplation
Uses hard data to get to answers to problems; reasoning is made explicit	Seeks to get to deeper questions and possibly new framing of issues	Uses intellect/reason and affect/intuition: mind and spirit experience
Resolves by defeating or persuading opposing side; or may find synthesis of opposites (consensus)	Invents unprecedented possibilities and new insights; produces a collective flow	Uncovers a decision rather than making it; discovers what is most life-giving and loving as listen to wisdom of the Spirit and all voices
Distinguishes and polarizes differences	Looks for what exists between extremes of differences	Seeks to hold polarities in balance
Sees parts, may seek connection among them	Looks for coherence first	Builds on belief that all are part of one body of Christ
Persons identify with positions or stay in fixed roles	Conversation uncovers concerns, needs, fears, hopes, interests	Options are weighed apart from being identified with particular persons
Each side names strengths of its own position and weaknesses of the other	Group members all work together to name strengths and weaknesses of options	Group members all name the negatives of an option, then the positives
Either/or choices: binary	Multiple options	May generate multiple options, discover a "third way," or discern yes or no
Knower's mind	**Learner's mind**	**Seeker's mind**

Table 2

Overall, it seems feasible to divide the clusters of activities or procedural elements that have been mentioned up until now, into roughly four types of activities: 1. preparation; 2. focusing the attention; 3. engaging in discerning activities; 4. identifying outcomes and making decisions. The overview of models at the end of this chapter illustrates the similarities in patterns and steps.

Roman Catholic theologian Mark A. McIntosh, in *Discernment and Truth. The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge*, begins his exploration with the observation that discernment involves five phases or moments, which are:

1. discernment as faith: spiritual discernment as grounded in a loving and trusting relationship with God;

2. discernment as distinguishing between good and evil impulses that move people;

3. discernment as discretion, practical wisdom, moderation, and generally good sense about what to do in given practical situations;

4. discernment as sensitivity to and desire to pursue God's will in all situations; and

5. discernment as illumination, contemplative wisdom, a noetic relationship with God that irradiates and facilitates knowledge of every kind of truth.[126]

The description of discernment MacIntosh offers could be applied as foundation to a personal and communal process. The picture he creates of his model reflects his grounding in and commitment to the contemplative tradition

Contemplative Grounding

1. Faith	5. Illumination
2. Impulses	4. Divine Will

3. Discretion

Active Practice

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126 McIntosh. *Discernment and Truth. The Spirituality And Theology of Knowledge.* New York: Herder & Herder, Crossroads Publishing Company, 2004, 5–6.

He adds that "we … envision this discerning life as always springing from a contemplative mode, extending forth in a practical mode, and always returning to the contemplative."[127] MacIntosh's approach does not strictly result in a procedural model but his findings make an enriching contribution to understanding discernment. Because it is not his intention to design a precise model of discernment, he does not trace the elements of the circle above throughout the book. Nor is he interested in offering a systematic exposition of a practice or theology of discernment in the life of the Church. Instead, he seeks to engage the reader in a historic exploration of discernment, through key texts of significant theological and mystical figures of Roman and occasionally Protestant backgrounds. McIntosh's program for the book is encapsulated in a twofold goal: "to outline the ever-flowing rhythm of a discerning life and to show the integrity of that life as grounded in the scriptural witness to God's reconciling work in Christ." As McIntosh provides a bird's eye view of Christian Antiquity, focusing especially on the "discernment of spirits", he notes a double shift in relation to how discernment was employed by early Christian communities, "from rarity to frequency, and from charism to virtue."[128]

Canadian Jesuit John English presents a model of communal discernment[129] from the Ignatian tradition which focuses on the spiritual formation of the community, believing that good decisions will eventuate once the community is brought into a deeper level of coherence and faithfulness. He illustrates the community's formation by immersing itself into "a foundational attitude of thanksgiving before God for its existence and continual preservation. Knowing its limitations and tendencies to deception it seeks from God the grace to be enlightened."[130] In the context of a communal discernment retreat the community engages in the practice of the daily examen, a rhythm of prayer and self examination. From within this context, the five stages of discernment, experience, reflection, articulation, interpretation, decision and action run parallel to the stages of the community's formation. English is quite clear, that "discernment is not a

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127 Ibid., 5.

128 Ibid., 24. For this insight McIntosh quotes Joseph T. Lienhard from his article 'On "Discernment of Spirits" in the Early Church'. 505–529. *Theological Studies* 41/3 (September 1980), 528–529.

129 English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community*, 179–180.

130 Ibid., 180.

once-in-a-lifetime experience but a way of life … in active relationship with the mind and heart of the living Christ."[131]

Daily Examen	Five Phases of Discernment	Communal Awareness
Thanksgiving. Prayer for Light		Community composes itself.
	Experience	Community tells its story
Examen	Reflection	Community reflects on its story
	Articulation	Community indicates what impressed it
	Interpretation	Community discerns the spirits moving it
Responses	Decision and Action	Community responds with sorrow and/or joy
		Community considers significance for decision-making

Table 3

The model that English presents stands out in that it makes the community itself the subject of the discerning process. Becoming a true community must precede the decision-making, otherwise no discernment can take place. This approach to discernment differentiates itself from most other models which are issue and task-centred. These methodologies revolve around the need for intellectual clarity in relation to an issue. Spiritual guidance is sought in pursuit of such clarity. The relationships of the discerning community are not subject to the process. They are assumed to function, whereas English attends to the community itself. As the community is formed in relationship to God and one another, discernment of movements can be pursued, decisions and actions become possible.

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131 Ibid., 176.

Pulling together the threads

From this survey of models of communal discernment a number of factors have emerged. Firstly, I note a distinction between formal and informal procedural elements. Due to the small size of a discerning group, as seen in Farnham et al.'s description of vocational discernment, informal elements can dominate the process. However, a core of attitudes, beliefs and practices prevents the process from disintegration or obstruction by distraction. In case of a larger size structures become more dominant in the process of directing the gathering of information for the purpose of spiritually grounded decision making. However, as Rendle and Mann have demonstrated, where informal spaces for personal and communal prayer and discernment are inserted into the structured planning process, the search for the Spirit's leading or for hearing God's voice can permeate the strategic element at every turn.

Secondly, five out of the nine models were designed for congregational change. This confirms the dominant drive to employ elements of discernment as a tool for a revitalising of the local congregation. In the context of facilitating congregational change there is a tendency to run a process of data collection which forms the basis for decision making parallel to a process of prayerful consideration of pathways and outcomes. Where the process of data collection is integrated into the larger commitment to prayer and spiritual listening the danger of the two moving in different directions can be minimised. Where discernment practices are subordinated to a strategic planning structure there is the danger that prayer, waiting and listening become an appendix to the more important work of collecting information. Alice and Mann take a number of precautions to prevent the disassociation of discernment from data collection. In Bandy's case the recognition of this issue has been less explicit.

Thirdly, each of the approaches has highlighted, in one form or another, that the communal discernment process must be embedded in the ongoing spiritual life of the members of the community. Farnham et al., MacIntosh and English have made this clear. Human emotions, desires and responses are seen as part of a life that abides in Christ.

Anchoring the discernment process into an intentional spiritual formation expressed in communal prayer does more than establishing good relationships among the participants. It takes the gathered community into a

> "communion" … because [t]hrough common prayer our spirits are knit together, giving us a foretaste of the communion of saints. By these living spiritual connections, courage is renewed, faith is deepened, and Christian fellowship is revitalized. *Koinonia* is the *telos* as well as the indispensable means of all true pastoral care.[132]

What Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger wrote for the ministry of pastoral care equally applies to the process of preparing a community for the practice of communal discernment. This is an especially challenging issue because the body of a discerning community does not carry a fixed identity. Rather, its identity is constantly forming and changing in the presence of Christ and under the influence of the Spirit. Matthias Scharer and Bernd J. Hilberath have recognized this kind of fluidity and claim that,

> God's self-revelation takes place again and again in every moment anew, and people must give their answer of faith in every moment anew. Thus the "We" of the community of the faithful is constantly being reconstituted. The church does not live for itself, but shares *communion* and *communication* with others. … [T]he church [is] not what it has made of itself but what it has received as a gift – not a self-arranged communication but the surprising and freely given communion of people.[133]

Considering the discerning community in light of the possibility of the formation of a '*communion*' adds weight to the practices of prayer, waiting, listening to one another and to God and to turning to the scriptures for guidance. A 'communion' is more than a group of people who communicate well with one another. It is a group of people who become more and more attuned to the voice of God and to how the voice of God might speak to them through others. A community thus finely tuned and sensitised becomes a truly 'gathered' community, gathered in Christ through the Spirit on behalf of the Church.

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132 Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray without Ceasing. Revitalizing Pastoral Care.* Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006, 1.

133 Matthias Scharer, Bernd Jochen Hilberath, *The Practice of Communicative Theology. An Introduction to a new theological culture.* New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2008, 80.

In conclusion, the relational communal environment which has been created for the sake of shared discernment will offer conditions for depth in searching and finding truth and discovering new pathways in action. The multi-directional practice of prayer as interacting with God and others, listening for the voice of God or the movement of the Spirit through waiting, silence, speaking and listening have been identified as essential for the emergence of a discerning climate.[134] In the chapter that follows, I will elaborate on the specific elements that bring about such a discerning relational environment.

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134   Farnham et al., *Listening Hearts*, 30–33.

Descriptions and Aims of Discernment in Overview

Authors	Farnham et al.	Bandy	Rendle & Mann	Oswald & Friedrich	Prechtel	Morris & Olsen	Isenhower & Todd	MacIntosh	English
Aims of Discernment	**Vocational Discernment**	**Congregational Change**	**Congregational Change**	**Congregational Change**	**Congregational Change**	**Facilitating faith-based decision making**	**Facilitating faith-based decision making**	**Academic, historic exploration of discernment**	**Discernment as part of a spiritual community's life**
Descriptions	An ever greater **integration of desires, feelings, reactions, and choices with a continuing commitment to abide in Christ.** In discernment we move beyond our feelings, our thoughts and our reasoning about what God wants of us, **to be led by God's Spirit toward action.** Discernment is a prayerful, informed, and intentional effort **to distinguish God's voice from other voices that influence us.**	ability to discern hope "is more than optimism that good will triumph in the end". **It is the perceptiveness that identifies potential and teases out the fabric of life. It is the ability to shift back and forth from the macro to the micro** and to see the smallest detail **as a fulcrum that can shift the course of history.**	Spiritual discernment is **the process by which we notice, ponder, and interpret our experience in light of faith. We listen for the still small voice** that beckons us onward. As part of discernment we willingly open **our hearts to the heart of God, our minds to the mind of God, our intentions to the purpose of God.** We attend to three sets of desires: **God's desire, my desire and our desire.**	Strategic planning tools are combined with an attitude of discernment: helping a congregation to develop a common vision beginning with a theology of discernment because **the work of strategic planning in the church is at heart about our relationship with God.**	Discernment is a means to **disclose, uncover, or discriminate between the forces underlying an issue or choice of directions and to seek as much clarity as possible the path or direction God** would have for the individual or community.	Discerning God's will is living **fully in the profoundly personal and fulfilling relationship with God that God offers us in Jesus Christ.** In a process of prayerful discussion, dialogue and discernment, conversations move in a spiral motion up and down a vertical axis, also called the magnetic core that is God's Will.	Spiritual discernment is about **finding God's yearning for the direction to live, …** When we engage in spiritual discernment, we **continually seek to know God's longing and to accept the invitation to live into the abundance and life God so freely offers.**	The acts of discernment are embedded in the discerning life which is always springing from a contemplative mode, extending forth in a practical mode, and always returning to the contemplative. **Contemplative grounding leads to active practice.** Five movements lead from one to the other through exploring **1. Faith, 2. Impulses, 3. Discretion, 4. Divine Will, 5. Illumination.**	**Discernment is** not a once-in-a-lifetime experience but **a way of life … in active relationship with the mind and heart of the living Christ.**

Table 4

Models of Communal Discernment in Overview

Bandy	Rendle/Mann	Oswald/Friedrich	Morris/Olsen	Isenhower/Todd	Ackerman	Prechtel	English/Ignatian
Intentional data collection	Congregational training for planning	Appoint a task force	**Selecting the Seed:** Framing	Naming & Framing	**Assessing the present situation** 1. What are you grateful for? What gifts has God given us? What has God been doing?	Listening for emerging issues and invitation	**Experience** Community forms itself Community tells its story
Discussions	Committee selection and training	Assess the congregation's ministry	**Preparing the Soil:** Grounding	Centring	**Naming the yearnings** 2. What do we want? What matters to us? What do we deeply desire?	Framing Questions	**Reflection** Community reflects on its story
Prayerful consideration	Needs assessment and data gathering: External audit, internal audit, learnings	Reflect on the congregation's history	Shedding	Remembering & Listening	**Questioning and discerning** 3. Is it really God I hear? How do I discern God's call? What is in God's heart?	Exploring Possibilities	**Articulation** Community indicates what impressed it
Discerning choices	Mission statement	Identify the congregation's norms	Rooting	Sorting	**Being willing to hear God's call** 4. What can we do to hear God better? What kind of practice do I need in order to listen?	Discovering Direction	**Interpretation** Community discerns the spirits moving it
	Vision	Interview key people in the community	**Cultivating the Plants:** Listening	Path Building	**Acting on God's call** How can we help each other? How can I get support? How can I live faithfully?	Testing for Consensus	**Decision and Action** Community responds with sorrow and/or joy Community considers significance for decision-making
	Objectives, goals and recommendations	(Optional) Survey the congregational meeting	Exploring	Offering		Making a Discernment	
	Board approval and referral Action plans and implementation	Hold a governing board retreat Develop a mission statement	Improving **Harvesting the Yield** Weighing	Waiting & Resting Implementing		Evaluating Results	
			Closing & Resting	God-Centred Evaluation			

Table 5

Chapter 3. The core elements of interaction in communal discernment

In this chapter I will examine in detail the key elements that define the interactions part within the discernment process, especially those elements that are most commonly mentioned, namely, the role of being present, prayerful listening, silence, holy indifference and of the place of the scriptures in discernment. The latter part of this chapter will address the question of obstacles to discernment. What are some of the factors that could prevent the unfolding of fruitful discernment in the community? The chapter will close with a reflection on the guiding propositions articulated in the introduction in light of the findings up to this point.

Presence

Presence to self, others or God is rarely directly dealt with in the discernment literature. It usually surfaces as a 'side-issue' in the treatment of silence, as I will show below. However, for the purpose of this investigation I have found it necessary to give the issue of 'presence' special attention.

Every interaction that is part of a communal discernment process begins with presence: the presence of a person to God, to others and to her or himself. A person who is present is anchored in a sense of the moment, rather than being distracted by concerns about themselves in the past or the future. A person centred in the presence is not haunted by worries about what others might think of them or by an anxiousness in relation to God. A person who is present is settled in his body, quiet in his mind and undisturbed by the flow of his emotions. Presence is a state of being that encompasses the whole person including self and other awareness. Van Deusen Hunsinger has explained the relationship between self and other awareness saying that "[p]aradoxically, we are able to focus on another's need apart from our own pressing concerns only when we are most self aware."[135] Being present to God adds a further dimension. Being aware of God, as Douglas Steere has proposed, means firstly, that a person needs "to stop being

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135   Van Deusen Hinsinger, *Pray Without Ceasing*, xiii.

"too elsewhere" and to *be there*; … prayer is a matter of being present where we are."[136] Being present to self, God and other enables a person to be aware of what is going on without too many distractions at any given moment.

Inspired by Henri Nouwen, Dorothy Butler Bass discusses the notion of hospitality in relation to a description of presence.[137] She refers to Nouwen who defined hospitality as "the creation of a free space"[138] offered to the other as an invitation to be who she truly is. Neil Pembroke describes presence in terms of availability, fidelity and belonging.[139] Hospitality as presence and availability, demonstrated in being receptive to another, however, does not occur in an abstract or neutral space. To share one's home space means to invite the other into an utterly personal space, and so offering hospitality, at its most essential level, means to "invite the other to 'be at home with me'", which entails to "truly communicate something of oneself to the other".[140] Being presence and hospitable are gifts to the other.

The kind of presence that is able to make room for another requires a relationship with oneself akin to that offered to others. It manifests as a form of self-directed empathy during which one "attends to oneself with the same quality of gentle openness one seeks to give to others"[141], as, for example, in the context of a communal discernment process. It calls a person to abstain "from judging or criticizing … as diligently as [they][142] would refrain from judging others. One approaches oneself with patience, seeking self-understanding and self-acceptance."[143] Possibly the most significant prototypical references to making space for the other as a form of loving presence is found in Philippians 2: 6–11; a famous, ancient salvation hymn which retells the story of Christ's incarnation in the language of self-emptying as the ultimate act of service. For the context of communal discernment, being presence to God, others and self marks the

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136 Douglas Steere, *Dimensions of Prayer. Cultivating a Relationship with God.* Nashville: Upper Room, 2002, 13.

137 Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, 79.

138 Ibid., 79, quoted from Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life.* New York: Doubleday, 1975, 46.

139 Neil Pembroke, *The Art of Listening. Dialogue, Shame and Pastoral Care.* London, New York: T&T Clark/Handsel Press; Grand Rapids Michigan, Cambridge, U.K.: William Eerdmans Publishing, 2002, 20–27.

140 Ibid., 21.

141 Van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray Without Ceasing*, 98.

142 Ibid., 96.

143 Ibid.

beginning of the process. Without genuine presence, prayer, listening and connecting with others would be difficult to achieve.

The role of prayerful listening

Nowhere is the act of listening more crucial than in the process of decision-making. In Matt. 13:43, at the end of a brief apocalyptic exposition on "the end of this age", Jesus concludes, "Let anyone with ears listen".[144] This repeated turn of phrase which appears six times[145] in the gospels and seven times in the book of Revelation,[146] testifies to the significance of the act of listening as a conduit to perceiving and receiving divine truth. This is not just any kind of listening, it is the "right" kind of listening. It points to the kind of listening that is part of being open, part of an inner posture of not-knowing-all-yet and being-open-to-hear-more. It is the kind of listening that extends itself to the strange and unfamiliar person and context, the kind of listening that can bear the unknown. In the gospels, this kind of right listening results in the discernment of the listeners' place in God's history, crystallised in the person and ministry of Christ and his message of the pending end in Matt 16:3. For the gospel of Matthew the unfolding of the end of time involved the clear separation of the righteous from the unrepentant sinners. At the end of history divine justice will inevitably be dispensed. God will finally reward the righteous and punish the unrighteous, although, as the parable of the goats and the sheep in Matt 25:31ff proves, things are more complicated when it comes to naming who is righteous and who is unrighteous. The eschatological significance of 'right' hearing represents nothing less than the opportunity for salvation.

What does 'prayerful listening' mean? If prayer is a form of interaction with God, having one's full attention on God and expressing this kind of attentiveness through speaking, waiting or listening, then 'prayerful listening' is attentiveness to God while also being attentive to others. For example, Farnham et al. suggest that "[l]istening is not an exclusively auditory matter. People

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144 I will address the passages from the gospel of Matthew mentioned here in more detail in chapter 4 under the heading 'Jesus and the practice of discernment', 110 ff.

145 Matt. 13:9 and 43; Mk 4:9 and 23; 7:16; Lk 8:8; 14:35.

146 Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 13:9.

transmit their thoughts and feelings in many ways. To fully receive communication from God through fellow humans, we need to listen with all that we are."[147] This is a form of wholistic listening that involves the whole person and their undivided attention. It is in one sense divided attention, a kind of auditory multitasking. While the physical ears listen to the words that can be perceived through sound and the mind registers their meaning, the 'spiritual ears' exercise that intuitive faculty which is attentive to the spiritual meaning spoken in or between the words or even dwelling in the silences.

The literature that pertains to conducting pastoral conversations recognises the spiritual significance of listening as a multi-focal task and can therefore be helpful in exploring the facets of prayerful listening further. For example, Australian pastoral theologian Graeme M. Griffin embeds listening into "the ministry of presence," the embodied presence of God through the presence and availability of the pastoral carer. Listening as a "ministry of silence" is "a deepening of the ministry of presence,"[148] in that it signals the availability of the listener to the person in need. He goes on to describe "true listening" as moving "deep into the being of the other person. What is heard are not just words but what lies within them and behind them."[149] This kind of listening, which is built on presence but moves gently toward the other, is employed by the whole person for the sake of the whole person that is present in the other.

Griffin's words echo Carl Rogers' famous definition of empathy as "entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment by moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person, to the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or whatever that he or she is experiencing. It means temporarily living in the other's life, moving about in it delicately without making judgments."[150] Rogers' emphasis on being sensitive to "the changing felt meanings" included a wide range of aspects in the emotional and cognitive world of experience of the other. As prayerful listening can express itself as a sensitivity to the inner world of experience of others it clearly includes a sensitivity that

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147 Farnham et al., *Grounded in God*, "Discernment Listening Guidelines", comment on 2, 58; see also John Ackerman, *Listening to God*, 26–27 and Farnham et al., *Listening Hearts*, 32.

148 Graeme M. Griffin, *Coming to Care. An Introduction to Pastoral Care for ordained ministers and lay people.* Melbourne: Uniting Church Theological Hall, Ormond College, 1995, 48.

149 Ibid., 47–48.

150 Carl Rogers, 142 quoted in Gerard Egan, *The Skilled Helper*, 76–77.

extends to spiritual matters. When it is practised as part of a communal discernment process it becomes an experience of mutual empathic listening with the attention being also on God or God's Spirit.

The issue of empathic listening raises the question of discerning the difference between the inner world of the other and the inner world of the self, similar to the question of how to distinguish between something of divine or of human origin. Rogers approached the matter of remaining oneself while empathising with another by suggesting an attitude of "as if". He recommends, "[t]o sense the client's anger, fear, or confusion as if it were your own, yet without your own anger, fear, or confusion getting bound up with it."[151] Carrie Doehring[152] is more explicit about this process of being involved while keeping an appropriate distance by developing a scale related to modes of relating with empathy in the middle, "disengagement" at one end of the scale and "merger" at the other. At the disengagement end of the scale, no empathy is possible, because no connection has been established. At the merger end of the scale, there is an overwhelming sense of fusion, accompanied by an overpowering flood of information which is equally disabling. Both poles are to be avoided in the caring relationship. Doehring describes empathy as

> a quality in a relationship that allowed me to imaginatively step into the experience of another, where there was a constant exchange of information both between me and the other, and within me. This flow of information (both conscious and unconscious) fine-tuned my awareness of what I imagined was going on within the other, within me, and between us.[153]

Doehring does not attempt to empathise with another "as if" it was her own world of experience without her own emotions, as Rogers suggested, but she engages with a keen awareness of the level of appropriate closeness and distance, thus holding in balance, awareness of self and other.

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151 Carl Rogers, 'The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change.' In: H. Kirschenbaum and V. Land Henderson, (eds.), *The Carl Rogers Reader*. London: Constable, 2006, 226. Quoted in Debora van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray Without Ceasing*, 55.

152 Carrie Doehring, *Taking Care. Monitoring Power dynamics and Relational Boundaries in Pastoral Care & Counseling*. Nashville, Abingdon, 1995, 14.

153 Ibid., 14.

Before the practice of listening had been re-interpreted through the Rogerian lens of empathic listening, Dietrich Bonhoeffer had issued a passionate plea for listening as a form of ministry in *Life Together*.[154] He constructs an interdependence between listening to God and listening to others, equalising the act of listening to a fellow Christian with listening to God. This is what Bonhoeffer said:

> Just as love to God begins with listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that he not only gives us his Word but also lends us his ear. So it is his work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him.[155]

Hearing others with the ear of God is inextricably linked with speaking the Word of God. One grows out of the other. Bonhoeffer encourages his readers: "We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God".[156] Listening with God's ears hones the listener's capacity to also hear God speaking. Bonhoeffer's approach to listening directly resonates with Calvin's understanding of how human beings acquire divine knowledge, namely through "hearing and learning" which is the direct result of the Spirit's work who "with a wondrous and special energy, forms the ear to hear and the mind to understand."[157] For the context of communal discernment this means that listening to another and hearing God speak are like two sides of the same coin.

Graham Standish adds a further dimension: understanding prayerful listening through offering the notion of "Mystical Intelligence" for the humble, that is the discerning, leader. For this context we will imagine that the community gathered for discernment consists of a group of humble congregational leaders and that what Standish suggests applies to each member. Standish, in a somewhat idealising manner, describes a person whose spiritual practices are an integrated part of their daily life, displaying the "*intuitive, integrative awareness of God's presence in all situations*"; it is someone who lives in a constant "*acceptance and expectation of*

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154   Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. London: SCM, 1954.
155   Ibid., 75.
156   Ibid., 76.
157   Calvin, *Institutes* II, 2, 20.

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providence", and who has a "*passionate desire to make God's will a priority.*"[158] Such a person is Spirit-led, or as Standish calls it, "Spirit-active", in contra-distinction from "pro-active."[159] Being a Spirit-active discerning leader implies the possibility of the listener being changed, because mystical intelligence is used "not only to gain a sense of what God is doing and leading us to do, but also to discern and determine how God is calling us to change ourselves so that we can become transformed."[160] Standish borrows from the work of Adrian van Kaam to propose that the key to living such a life depends on developing

> deeper awareness that is in tune with our transconscious, which integrates both our aspirations (yearning for God) and inspirations (the deeply sensed in-breathings of God into our mind, heart and soul.) The transconscious is a level of consciousness that goes beyond conscious and unconscious awareness. This level of consciousness is connected to the transcendent, to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit who speaks to us from the eternal … While the transconscious is a dimension of consciousness that is connected to the sacred and divine, it is also easy to ignore because it's a deep, rather than surface, consciousness. Like the unconscious, it lies deep within our psyche, connecting it with God at levels that the conscious mind doesn't easily access.[161]

The term "transconsciousness" could perhaps be replaced with a state of alert and open perception towards human and spiritual, visible and invisible promptings. But no matter what it is called, this kind of multidimensional sensitivity is part of the task of prayer. "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17) is the invitation for "making the heart a prayer room", or for "keeping a running conversation with God throughout the day".[162] Standish refers to 2 Cor 12:9, the famous passage in which Paul shares an experience of hearing God's voice in response to a request to be relieved of a weakness, saying, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness," and explains prayer as an encounter between wills: "Prayer enables our will and God's will to come into alignment as we diminish our will, letting God's will become

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158 Standish, *Humble Leadership*, 139–155. Italics are Standish's.

159 Ibid., 139.

160 Ibid., 155.

161 Ibid., 147–148. Standish is referring to a reading from Adrian van Kaam, *Traditional Formation: Formative Spirituality*. Vol. 5. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992, 271.

162 Ibid., 153. Standish quotes Brother Lawrence's teachings on *practicing the presence of God*. Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Translated by Robert J. Edmonson. Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 1985, 89–90.

more influential."[163] Genuine prayer for guidance is understood as a practice of weakening the ego as the seat of self-will. As a result "*humble* people of prayer increasingly become more willing to allow God's will to flow through them, rather than willfully assuming that their own will is God's will because of their own holiness."[164] Prayerful listening in this vein surrenders the personal will to authentic spiritual perceptions in an openness to be changed. Prayerful listening as an unconditional openness to be exposed to and redirected by God's will is of fundamental importance to the communal discernment process in that it hands over the process and outcome to God.

In previous times prayerful listening was thought to be obstructed by a wilful ego. However, Ann and Barry Ulanov, who incorporate spiritual direction and Jungian psycho-analysis into their work reinterpret the function of the ego in relation to prayer through the experience of "purgation" and suggest:

> Purgation … turns things around in both psyche and soul. … [I]t may be more difficult to take than mere chastening, for it requires accepting ourselves and sometimes accepting that what superficially looks like a fault or a limitation, even a sin, may turn out to be a major part of our identity, even an opening through which God reaches right into us … Thus a deep wound to the formation of the ego, that centre of personal identity, that might leave us forever fragile, anxious, boarded up against others, may instead become the aperture, the very point of sure accessibility through which God touches the soul and moves it to give all it needs and hopes into God's care. … The self that emerges this way comes forth unshackled, scoured, clean, uncovered because anchored in God.[165]

Rather than looking at the ego as the seat of an obstinate, resistant human will which is set to oppose God's will and is thus in need of being weakened so that the voice of God can be heard,

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163 Ibid., 63.

164 Ibid., 63.

165 Ann and Barry Ulanov, 'Prayer and Personality: Prayer as Primary Speech'. 24–33. In: Jones, Wainright, Yarnold, *The Study of Spirituality.* 1986, 29. The Ulanovs are using Carl Gustav Jung's notion of the ego as defence against an opening to the self, which is the seat of perception of the divine, amongst other things, as yet another way of speaking about the mystery of the interaction between the human and divine Spirit. This language is also commensurate with the psychologising tendencies of desert spirituality writers, such as Evagrius Ponticus and Diadochus, as Mark MacIntosh has shown. See also C.G. Jung's definition of the "Ich", in: *Psychologische Typen.* Gesammelte Werke, Sechster Band. Olten und Freiburg im Breisgau: Walter Verlag, 13. Auflage, 1978, 471.

the ego, or sense of "I" is regarded as a potential opening through which God might speak. A wounded ego, in this sense, does not have to be a hindrance but a means to discernment.

Prayerful listening, similar to presence, is foundational to a fruitful process of discernment. It makes space to hear God, others and self in ways that go beyond the usual day-to-day distortions. Prayerful listening as a practice of being open to self, others and to God makes the listener ready for a divine/human interaction.

Silence

Prayerful listening in a situation where no words are spoken and silence prevails presents a challenge in its own right. Douglas Purnell[166] points to the opportunities that silence presents in the context of a pastoral conversation. He associates the fear of silence with the fear of chaos and reframes it as "[t]he creative space, the space of imagination, the space for the voice of God."[167] He points out that

> [i]n the biblical narratives creation comes from chaos, water comes in wilderness, flowers bloom in the desert, light comes in darkness, resurrection comes in death. Wilderness, desert, darkness, and death are all places of chaos and they are places where the voice of God is heard afresh, as new and life giving. A willingness to enter the conversational space of chaos with the other is a willingness to make the conversation sacred.[168]

Purnell's proposition that sitting in silence with another qualifies as a sacred conversation transforms potential awkwardness into an opportunity for a potential encounter. Obviously, the sacredness of the pastoral conversation is not confined to silence. However, the discipline of bearing silence without breaking it with trivial remarks provides a primary uninhabited space in which God is able to create new possibilities *ex nihilo* through the activity of God's Spirit.

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166   Douglas Purnell, *Conversation as Ministry. Stories and Strategies for Confident Care giving.* Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003.
167   Ibid., 73.
168   Ibid., 73.

Father Ammonas, a disciple of St. Anthony, says the following about silence:

> I have shown you the power of silence, how thoroughly it heals and how fully pleasing
> it is to God. … Know that it is by silence that the saints grew, that it was because of
> silence that the power of God dwelt with them, because of silence that the mysteries
> of God were known to them.[169]

The sublime sound of sheer silence as antechamber to a face to face encounter with God is described in Elijah's encounter with God on Mount Horeb in I Kings 19: 11–15. This story between the exhausted prophet who is ready to take off his mantle and an empowering God who has yet more in store for his prophet, is possibly one of the most authoritative stories when it comes to rating the experience of silence as a preparatory space for transformation, as well as a purifying and healing space in its own right. Richard Foster wrote about "a listening stillness" as a unique quality in the experience of silence which is especially relevant to the context of discernment. This is how he describes it:

> There is stillness, to be sure, but it is a listening stillness. We feel more alive, more active
> than we ever do when our minds are askew with muchness and manyness. Something
> deep inside us has been awakened and brought to attention. Our spirit is on tiptoe –
> alert and listening.[170]

Silence as an empty, undefined space, filled with creative life and beckoning possibilities is an often unexplored spiritual practice. It can also be viewed as space for letting go, of divesting the mind of its false hopes and unreal expectations. It can be a space for sorting through false solutions without distractions. It can be loaded with expectation and anticipation, or void of life, a space of exhaustion or despair, a conduit to new life or a dead end. For the context of communal discernment silence is regarded as an opportunity for waiting for the emergence of new options, for coming to rest in a situation of overwhelm, or silence as an opportunity for facing a dead end.

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169   Richard Foster quotes Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*. New York, Garden City: Doubleday, 1971, 30. In: Richard Foster,
        Prayer. Finding the Heart's True Home. London, Sydney, Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992, 163.

170   Ibid., 172.

Holy Indifference

The Ignatian tradition, which will be explored in more depth in chapter 6, is giving particular prominence to arriving at a place of indifference, a detachment from any particular outcome as well as the willingness to abandon all personal agendas. Indifference means the freedom to discover pure divine knowledge and direction through the process of discernment rather than insights mediated through the filter of preconceived ideas and personal desires. Becoming aware of those positions that inhibit, distort or unduly limit the process of discernment is part of a prayerful engagement that aims for indifference.[171] But indifference is not merely a state of being loosed from confining attachments. Indifference is also a condition for what Richard F. Foster called the "Prayer of Relinquishment", meaning a joining in Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane, "Not my will but yours be done."[172] Letting go of personal attachments is accompanied by the renewed commitment to hearing and doing God's will.

The use of the scriptures in discernment

Catholic New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson has claimed that "[t]he Word of God in Scripture, …, is an essential aspect of the church's discernment in decision making. It is in that Word – that set of symbols and stories – that the church finds the grammar for deciphering the Word spoken here and now."[173] Johnson's statement underlines the significance of the scriptures for the process of discernment. There are three main ways in which scriptures are used as part of a personal or corporate discernment process: as inspiration, authorisation and verification. The three are connected through the underlying conviction that through the scriptures God still speaks directly into the life of the church and its members, aided by the translating faculty of the Spirit and without using any other means. Hence, van Deusen Hunsinger recommends that, "[w]e should read the Bible expecting the Holy Spirit to guide our understanding. … We open our lives up to God with the expectation that we will be guided concretely in our next steps."[174]

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171 See Olsen & Morris, *Discerning the Will of God Together*, 69, where the process of "shedding" is built into the metaphor of planting. The dying of the seed symbolises the willingness to let go.

172 Foster, *Prayer*, 49.

173 Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment. Decision Making In the Church*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, 25.

174 Van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray without Ceasing*, 45.

To be guided by the scriptures without any other means of interpretation, analysis or translation points to a purely devotional, rather than historic-critical exegetical use.

The inspirational use of Scripture is frequently connected with the practice of the *lectio divina*. Literally meaning "divine reading", it is a devotional approach to studying the scriptures which was first articulated as a four step process, called *lectio, meditatio, oratio and contemplation*. It was first mentioned in the 12th century book *The Ladder of Monks*, written by a Carthusian monk, named Guigo II.[175] He explained the four activities as follows:

> Reading is the careful study of the Scriptures, concentrating all one's powers on it. Meditation is the busy application of the mind to seek with the help of one's own reason for knowledge of hidden truth. Prayer is the heart's devoted turning to God to drive away evil and obtain what is good. Contemplation is when the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and held above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness.[176]

In this method reason is paired with devotion. Meditation invites the active pursuit of intellectual insight, whereas contemplation directs the whole of human attention to God. However, this kind of insight does not ask for further information. It takes the text at face value. John Ackerman gives a contemporary example of how *lectio divina* might be practiced by a community, instructing the facilitator of a discerning community as follows:

> Take a passage of scripture like Matthew 28: "Go, make disciples of all nations." Tell the group that we will do a different kind of Bible study. We'll take this as a personal word from God. We'll listen not only for ideas *[meditation]*, but for God's heart, God's passion for us *[contemplation]* … Read the first time, and ask people what they think *[lectio and meditation]* … Read again, and ask people to respond in prayer *[oratio]* … Read again, and ask people to respond nonverbally to God *[contemplation]*.[177]

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175 Guigo II, *The Ladder of Monks and Twelve Mediations.* Translated by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh. London: Mowbray, 1978. Quoted in van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray without Ceasing*, 45–46.

176 Ibid., 46.

177 Ackerman, *Listening to God*, 130. To reference the steps of *lectio divina* I inserted the italics in brackets.

At the end of this exercise Ackerman transitions from the inspirational to an imaginative/authoritative use of scriptures by suggesting to the facilitator the following:

> With a group or congregational focus, you can use a scripture passage for the group as a whole. It depends on where the church is, in emotionally trusting the community with feelings and spiritual stories. If it is wounded, take five minutes after silence and reading the scripture, and have members imagine the congregation as a man by the pool at Bethesda. Then ask, "What does Jesus say? Jesus asks us if we want to be healed. Do we?" If the group is confused, work with a passage in which Jesus sends the disciples out. If your church is too busy, let the congregation be Martha in the story of Mary and Martha. What does Jesus say to the church when it's like Mary? When it's a Martha?[178]

Ackerman uses Scripture as a mirror for the community to increase in self awareness and discover opportunities for correction, healing and growth. However, there is a danger that the purely devotional use of the text leads to oversimplification. Some of rich layers of meaning that surface when the text is read through the lens of historic critical research are potentially lost. To do justice to the hermeneutic complexities of a biblical text and the community searching for guidance, more information needs to be brought to the text. In the current traditional form of *Lectio Divina*, the devotional and inspirational use of the scriptures is practiced without exegesis.

A more nuanced approach to dealing with scriptures in a devotional context is found in Farnham et al. who suggest:

> When we think that our Lord is speaking to us, it is prudent to determine if what we hear is consistent with Scripture. If it is not, perhaps the voice we hear is not God's. Or, if it is God, we may be misunderstanding what is being said. Or we may be misinterpreting Scripture.[179]

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178 Ibid., 131.

179 Suzanne G. Farnham, Stephanie A. Hull, R. Taylor MacLean, *Grounded in God. Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations.* Revised Edition. Harrisburgh, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999, 44.

Here the use of Scripture as verification or measuring rod for the authenticity is employed as "the Lord's voice". The careful examination of the voice's consistency with Scripture prevents an undifferentiated enmeshment between text and human experience. A respectful difference remains. But further direction is necessary:

> We need to bear in mind that every word spoken in the Bible is a partial and limited witness to the truth. We should not let our preferences silence any biblical voice, nor should we read the Bible merely to assure ourselves that we are right, but, rather, to look for areas in which we have not been listening. Take care to consider the context in which a book of Scripture was written. Accepting a passage of Scripture without considering its presuppositions can lead to distortion … No one can hear the gospel of Christ except through the events of one's own time, for the Holy Spirit is a living teacher who does not merely repeat a tradition of the past.[180]

Accepting the differences in particularity and context between then and now does greater justice to the hermeneutic challenges of interpreting an ancient text for the present time. Inspiration and verification work in tandem through the Spirit. But the Spirit also alerts the participants to the need for exegesis of context while remaining a "living teacher" who enlivens the meaning of Scripture to the discerning community. The limitations of a text, its own meaning and its coming alive to the lives of the readers are three themes that resonate decisively with the way Scripture has been regarded in the Reformed tradition.

Oratio and *contemplatio* were inseparably fused in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who instructs his readers in the use of the scriptures as follows:

> We want to meet Christ in his Word. We turn to the text in our desire to hear what it is that he wants to give us and teach us today through his Word … In the same way that the word of a person who is dear to me follows me throughout the day, so the Word of Scripture should resonate and work within me ceaselessly. Just as you would not dissect and analyze the word spoken by someone dear to you, but would accept it just as it was said, so you should accept the Word of Scripture and ponder it in your heart

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180 Ibid., 44–45.

as Mary did. That is all. That is meditation … Ponder this word in your heart at length, until it is entirely within you and has taken possession of you.[181]

The role of the Scriptures in communal discernment is integral to the process of being "tuned-in" to what the Spirit or God is trying to do in the life of a community. Hearing and pondering the scriptures provides the foundation for prayerful speaking and listening. It is therefore instrumental in priming participants for decisions that reflect an alignment with the living interaction between God and God's people.

Indicators for a discerned outcome

The question of how a community knows whether or not the discerned outcome originates in an authentic divine impulse or not is dealt with by taking a "heuristic" approach. Hence, Farnham et al. provide a set of criteria that signify "signs God uses" that participants are aware of, such as "Gods peace", "joy", "energy", "persistence", "convergence" and "fruitfulness".[182] These signs are only used tentatively in verifying the presence of a discerned outcome. The emotions and qualities named point to Paul's list relating to the fruits of the Spirit in Gal. 5:22–23. John English considers members' remembrance of their vocation in Christ, that is, the process of bringing to life the common "experiential knowledge of true call"[183] as the most valuable criterion for validating a discerned outcome. This might bring a community to

> face the call to live a simpler life-style to be in solidarity with the poor. A community might wish to call the poor and marginalized into its midst so it can learn from them. A community might face its own dysfunctional manner of being and realize it is still called to proclaim the good news. It might network with other groups attempting to improve human life … [184]

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181 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*. Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1986, 32–33. Quoted in Van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray without Ceasing*, 48.

182 Farnham et al., *Grounded in God*, 27–30.

183 English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community*, 139–140.

184 Ibid., 140.

The challenging issue of self-denial is viewed as a potential source for growth or a means to resolve conflict. He quotes Ignatius, who recommended the willingness to bear insult and contempt from others as an opportunity to grow in humility. The point is illustrated by sharing an anecdote about a spiritual community which opposed the building of a new church as part of its Parish and received hostility and rejection from the congregation and from within its own ranks. In the process of gradually accepting rejection "without rancor or publicly criticizing others", reconciliation eventually became possible. As the community reflected back on this difficult time it recognized that it had been "given the freedom to suffer for the sake of justice."[185] Thus, being willing to be misunderstood can itself be a sign of an authentically discerned outcome.

John Ackerman names the following experience-based criteria "Reliable Signs of Grace" signifying a change in spiritual wellbeing in the participants themselves, which in turn is taken as a sign for authenticity in a discerning process or a discerned outcome:

1. We experience a transformation of behavior and character. We are surprised at grace, goodness, that we did not manufacture.

2. We know a new affection for God for God's sake, not for God's gifts. We are able to love God when things don't go well, when we're depressed, when we don't have good feelings or thoughts.

3. We discover a new sense of knowing. This knowing is more than intellectual assent; it is a deep trust, a personal conviction. We don't have to browbeat others; we are able to love our enemies, particularly in our family and those at the other end of the political spectrum.

4. We experience balance in our lives. We keep Sabbath, we can play, we can laugh at ourselves.

5. We know how to surrender and how to persevere. Suffering and obedience go together. Obedience is made perfect through suffering.[186]

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185   Ibid., 141.
186   John Ackerman, *Listening to God*, 91–92.

Where the discernment process has been effective all motives, agendas, alliances and attachments are sifted and shaken by the movements of the Spirit, who questions and examines them in light of what is perceived as God's agenda in Christ. Reasons for and against an option are weighed, especially in the Ignatian tradition of communal discernment. An authentically discerned outcome is likely to be present if an increase in love, justice, mercy, reconciliation among the discerning participants and a notable growth in compassion for those who need it the most can be detected. Decisions that arise from a process of discernment are marked by a greater embodiment of Christ's message.

Recognising that the community has seen the emergence of a discerned outcome is held against the scriptures that speak to the work of the Spirit, against a person's sense of vocation to serve God and the poor. Perhaps a third criteria could be an examination of the question whether a conversion towards a deepened faith tangible in a deeper love of God and others has taken place. Discernment as an outcome is often accompanied by changes in relationship with God and others, changes that signal a greater level of love and acceptance, holy indifference for the sake of those in need and a pervading sense of peace toward those with whom conflict could have been the more likely outcome. In the sacred space of a discerned outcome interactions with God and with one another are no longer distinct because they reflect the same spiritual qualities. Being at peace with God and with one another goes hand in hand. While decision making in a rule driven environment can produce number based outcomes, where the Spirit has intentionally been given room to move and participants have been prayerfully listening to the whispers of the Spirit in each others' voices, the incarnational quality of a discerned outcome pervades all aspects of the interactive process and by default all aspects of relationships with God and with one another.

Disturbances to Communal Discernment

Disturbances to communal discernment are to be expected, because the process is run and undergone by fallible human beings. To look at disturbances in communal discernment is not to develop a pathology of communal failure but to name the ordinary barriers to faithful living in

both the personal and communal realm, which, when left untouched can create serious obstacles for the movement of the Spirit, that is the free flow of human and divine interaction and the unencumbered exploration of a way forward for the sake of God's mission and God's Reign. But however ordinary these obstacles might be many of them would ultimately shine a light on what, in the life of the Church, is called sin.

The first catalogues of deadly sins and saving virtues emerged during the era of desert spirituality in the hope that mapping out the landscape of human sin would enable the traveller to avoid its traps. In an effort to avoid negative thought patterns similar to the cognitive-therapeutic paradigm,[187] Evagrius Ponticus (345–399) collated a selection of eight *logismoi*, "thoughts, picturings, considerings", stating "[t]hat it is not in our power to determine whether we are disturbed by these thoughts, but it is up to us to decide if they are to linger within us or not and whether or not they are to stir up our passions."[188] Regarding sins firstly as thought forms rather than sinful actions suggests a continuity from thinking to action. At the same time, it assumes an action-like vitality and reality of certain thoughts in the inner life of the person engaged in contemplating union with God. A thought about a sinful issue would precede sinful action. Turning away from sinful thoughts prevented sin from festering and increasing. Evagrius was especially concerned with the obsessive repetitiveness of eight mental impulses which he classified as gluttony, impurity, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory and pride.[189] He was aware that as a result of their recurring nature they had the power to interrupt or indeed arrest any progress towards union with God, darken the soul and cloud the mind of the seekers. To map the anatomy of sins was, however, not primarily a path to accomplish moral perfection but a tool that functioned much like a rail for the seeker to cling to as part of their desire to cross the abyss of separation from God. Moral integrity was woven into the fibre of spiritual progress, not separate from it.[190]

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187 See 'Coping with negative thoughts'. Karen Pittman. 'Coping with negative thoughts.' 2008. http://www.cognitivebehaviourtherapy.org.uk/guides/negative Accessed 09/11/2010. The website offers a series of questions which helps a client to interrogate and ultimately correct their negative thought patterns. The aspect of dwelling on destructive thoughts rather than moving onto different ways of thinking, represents the parallel with Evagrius' suggestion.

188 Evagrius Ponticus, *The Practicos and Chapters on Prayer*. Translated by John Eudes Bamberger. Cistercian Studies 4. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1981, § 6, 17. Quoted in Mark McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth*, 134.

189 Evagrius, *Practicos*, §§ 8–14 quoted in McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth*, 100–103.

190 McIntosh makes this point in saying that "the moral and intellectual virtues are integrally related." In *Discernment and Truth*, 145.

The force that would have the power to distract the seeker was named "the devil", "the evil one", or "the enemy". It was conceived of as the personal opposite to God, but without owning God's omnipotence. The dark forces could get the upper hand over a seeker in moments of weakness and of engaging with the thought patterns of one or more of the eight sins. In different spiritual authors, these deadly thought forms took on different names. Catherine of Siena, for example, exposed the hidden connections between "self-love, ingratitude, and loss of discernment", whose destructive logic goes like this: "the awful paradox of self-love is that the soul, desperately seeking to satisfy itself, is converted to a grasping and ungrateful frame of mind in which … nothing of divine mercy can be remembered; as a consequence, the world and the self "become unbearable", for reality cannot be touched and known by such a "dead love"."[191] Being enamoured with the self spelt out the end of the spiritual journey before it had even begun. Exaggerations and distortions, false knowledge, despondency and doubt, all of which were signs of deception, were regarded as key disturbances in the discerning life of the spiritual seeker.[192] Excessive self doubt has been recognised as a barrier to discernment since desert times since it unfolds in opposition to pride and self-congratulation.[193] The seesaw of pride of self and despising of self eventually would lead the seeker to a dead end that he would find himself eventually catapulted back into the world. Because self doubt eventually leads to doubting God's goodness, as a form of self-preoccupation, it is especially destructive in undermining the discernment process as a whole.

Communal discernment builds on personal discernment at a core level. John English talks about the difference between *deceptive* and *authentic* patterns of discernment in the Ignatian tradition.[194] In the role of the facilitator he invites a discerning community to name the deceptive patterns that are virulent in the world and from there begin to identify the equivalent manifestations in the life of the community. He warns that a community must be "vigilant against adopting deceptive patterns which may flow from the surrounding culture into its behaviour. For example, members may find that they are reflecting on decisions with a

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191   McIntosh paraphrases a paragraph from Catherine de Siena, *The Dialogue*, § 31, no page number given. Translated by Suzanne Noffke, *Classics of Western Spirituality*. New York: Paulist Press, 1980, in *Discernment and Truth*, 118–119.

192   Ibid., 115–124.

193   McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth*, 119–120.

194   English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community*, 138–139.

conviction that they must win at all cost … These patterns tend to creep into their belief without anyone noticing."[195] The subtleties of how communal discernment can be derailed need to especially be observed when "high energy states" are present. English invites the discerning community to consider that the good feeling of a perceived consolation

> can also be an occasion for deception, for deception can take place when we are in a high energy state of good will towards others, as happens when we are in a generous mood or excited by insights. At such times we can make decisions out of the exciting energy rather than for the sake of God's reign. Careful discernment is necessary to recognize the motivation moving us to decision and action.[196]

English's warnings are of special importance when moods and emotions which are inevitably part of discerning participants' experience begin to take centre stage. Just because something feels good, does not mean it is good, in the sense that it has emanated from the goodness of God. As I will discuss later on, allowing for emotions to be an important arena for discernment without being in and of itself a sign of a discerned outcome, is one of the touch stones of the Ignatian tradition.

In a similar vein John Ackerman lists a number of disturbances to discernment, calling them the "Unreliable Signs of Grace" and lists the following five points:

1. Intense affection or passion. We feel excited, close to God; things work out; we are touched. (This affection or passion may be perverted by our ego.)

2. The appearance of love, kindness, politeness. We have nice meetings where everyone agrees. (This, too, will pass.)

3. Feelings of assurance that we are saved, that we are guided, that we are filled by God. (Hitler and lots of clergy were sincere in thinking the Fuehrer was sent by God.)

4. Praise for God. (Anyone can praise when things go well.)

5. Religious activities. (They may or may not be signs.)[197]

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195   Ibid., 139.
196   Ibid., 136.
197   John Ackerman, *Listening to God,* 91.

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Ackerman challenges the participants of a discerning community not to confuse the expressions of a religious culture with a discerned outcome. He invites members of the discerning community to sharpen their awareness of where the signs of confirmation for a particular direction originate. Similarly to English he notes the danger of too much emotional intensity, which may cloud the view to the way forward.

Farnham et al. regard the following factors as impediments to discernment:

- Culture
- Prosperity
- Self-interest
- Self-absorption
- Self-righteousness
- Desire for security
- Desire for certainty.
- Human time frames
- Self-doubt.[198]

The issues in this list range from being culturally encased into a mind set or a set of behaviours that have the power to constrain an openness to the Spirit. The items that relate to the inner posture of the self are described as a defensive adherence to what is known and safe, rather than being open to the unknown of the Spirit's leading.

Graham Standish addresses two kinds of disturbances in relation to the effective engagement of humility, as core qualities in exercising discernment: personality disorders and divisions in the church. He draws from observations of modern psychology and psychiatry to demonstrate how, especially in the context of ministry, ordinary personality traits can turn into personality disorders.[199] After listing the characteristics of the histrionic, borderline, narcissistic, dependent and obsessive-compulsive personality disorders, Standish emphasises psychological and spiritual self-awareness enhanced by counselling and spiritual direction as balancing factors

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198   Farnham et al., *Listening Hearts,* 36–37.
199   Standish, *Humble Leadership,* 41–56.

to the sabotaging of exaggerated personality traits.[200] Although Standish's analysis is outside of most therapeutically untrained ministry professionals' repertoire, it indicates the close interconnection between the pastor and the congregation. It also warns of the detrimental impact a lack of the pastor's wellbeing can have on the healthy functioning of a congregation, especially when involved in a communal discernment process.

An equally disturbing aspect of the life of the church is the reality of division.[201] Naming generational, ideological and great command/great commission divisions Standish recognises the deep seated barriers that potentially prevent the church from being unified in its endeavour to discern a common future. The humble leader seeking to unify the church is confronted by "ideological divisions [that] turn Christian faith into a battleground for supremacy over ideals"[202] and perpetual disunity. He offers a compelling critique of various forms of righteousness, i.e. exclusive loyalty to a version of right faith and right theology, culminating in regarding each belief's version as an exclusive manifestation of purity. Standish sees a way through the maze of divisions by inviting members to ground themselves in their vocation, into God's presence and into loving relationships with one another. Stipulating "*calling, grounding and binding*" as core activities of Jesus' ministry, so Standish directs the humble leader's effort towards unifying the church.[203]

Obstacles to discernment come from many sources: from internalising a communal or societal culture of self interest, from broken down relationships, attachment to positive emotions, exclusive theological loyalties and wounded egos. What makes discernment difficult are precisely all the qualities that enhance it, but in the form of being absent or significantly diminished. Where presence is disregarded, where prayerful listening is not practiced, where the scriptures are ignored or used to prove a position rather than challenge it, there the discerning environment cannot thrive and will therefore produce little fruit. Mistaking an appearance of authentic discernment for the thing itself can never be completely avoided. However, when the ethos of interaction is carried by care, respect and trust; when peace and joy arise from patient

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200   Ibid., 57.
201   Ibid., 93–102.
202   Ibid., 100.
203   Ibid., 102.

listening, including from listening to the whispers of the Spirit, erring on the side of deception can be minimised. A community or person who remember their vocation will find themselves brought back to inspirational yet sobering moments of their spiritual lives. Similar to the hallmarks of discernment, the obstacles to discernment need to be carefully investigated in terms of their origin to be either neutralised or embraced. Becoming learned in guiding a process of discernment and finding a way through the maze of possibilities and dead ends is possible, however, it requires thorough preparation and training in the art and craft of spiritual formation of communities.

Formation for communal discernment

The educational and formational challenges that come with a new commitment to discernment in decision making are not to be underestimated. Luke Timothy Johnson summarises his understanding of a communal discernment process in terms of inviting a small group into a process of theological reflection. Discernment is shaped by the following intentions:

> to generate the capacity to think theologically; to detect the experience of God in the context of worldly life, to learn to "narrate" that experience; to discern the movement of the Spirit it reveals; to interpret the Scripture in the light of the manifold narratives of the group; to decide for God.[204]

Learning to detect the experience of God in one's personal life, in the scriptures and in the life stories of others prepares the decision for God. Each of these steps may require skilful preparation and thorough understanding.

The work of Rosemary Dougherty[205] and Parker Palmer[206] can provide inspiration and direction towards education and formation for discernment. The work of these two educators and practitioners in the realm of discernment holds a multitude of constructive elements for a curriculum in search of a formational process that enables participants to acquire knowledge

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204   Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 161.
205   Rosemary Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction: community for discernment.* Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1995.
206   Parker Palmer, *Hidden Wholeness. The Journey Toward an Undivided Life.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

grounded in the narratives of life and of the experience of God. Rosemary Dougherty alerts the reader to the fact that learning to discern the will of God in community springs from daily communal life. It needs to be an extension of communal discipleship, which

> fosters and demands the asceticism of radical love, a love which we can only pray for and be open to receiving. It is characterized by single-mindedness, a love of God that encompasses and directs our love of others. It is a love that we gradually grow into as we pray for an attitude of intercessory prayer.[207]

The formational development from a self- to a God-focused and from a God- to an other-focused perspective comes with the faithful practice of prayer and a practice of interaction with others that is permeated by prayer. A curriculum for communal discernment would have to carefully consider how to engage participants in the kind of prayerful practices that enable discernment.

Parker Palmer's concern for teaching discernment develops from the trajectory of finding personal wholeness as an ongoing commitment and a recurring outcome. Palmer developed a small group process, called "circles of trust", in which authentic speaking and listening are core practices for each member. The safe space of the 'circle of trust' forbids judgement, fixing and arguments and invites open, non-directive questions. It "holds us in a space where we can make our own discernments, in our own way and time, in the encouraging and challenging presence of other people."[208] Palmer claims that when the soul is given space to breathe and freedom to express itself it reveals its own fragmentation and precipitates new levels of wholeness. Wholeness of the person is evident when the gap between being, saying and doing becomes smaller and congruence in being and doing comes in reach. When a person has accomplished a significant level of wholeness, then discernment becomes a daily life activity performed with some ease. According to Palmer, fragmentation of the inner self is the foremost obstacle to discerning anything of God. In the process of arriving at new levels of wholeness, the 'inner teacher' is instrumental. It is a guiding faculty inherent in every human soul, very similar to 'that

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207 Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction*, 14.

208 Parker J. Palmer, 'Sitting in Circles'. *In our journey toward inner truth, we need a supportive community—a circle of trust—to guide us.* At: http://www.beliefnet.com/Inspiration/2004/10/Sitting-In-Circles.aspx#ixzz1s5lANJVK Accessed 15/04/2012.

of God in everyone'. A curriculum that allows for the reshaping of a person and community towards wholeness has to embrace a commitment to depth in speech and authenticity in practice. Communal discernment in this vein is but an extension of a highly sensitised hearing of the Spirit's promptings at the heart of the everyday life of discipleship. As Luke Timothy Johnson so aptly put it, spiritual discernment is

> that habit of faith by which we are properly disposed to hear God's Word, and properly disposed to respond to that Word in the practical circumstances of our lives.[209]

Growing a 'habit of faith' which forms a disposition for 'proper hearing' which in turn releases an active and faithful response in the concrete realities of daily living, cannot simply be accomplished in a course of study, but it requires lifelong learning.

Revisiting the two guiding propositions

At this stage of the investigation I have offered a review of the contemporary models of communal discernment with their guiding aims and implicit or explicit definitions. Communal discernment may be initiated for the context of a consultation for congregational growth, the vocational discernment of a small group or as part of an administrative council of the church. The common denominator for these different contexts is the desire for divine direction and the alignment of human decisions with God's will. As a result, communal discernment is becoming more and more part of the Church's practice of decision making. Communal Discernment as process represents a specific set of spiritual practices that participants engage in, individually and as a gathered community, with the intent to discover binding (authoritative) divine knowledge in relation to what it perceives as God's will or God's call to faithful action. Some of these processes have been designed in two different modes: to do business and to engage in discernment. Where the two processes do not intersect enough, discernment as process and outcome is in danger of becoming an appendix. Discernment as outcome is the explicit formulation of that binding divine knowledge or guidance that the community sought. My first guiding proposition offered a generic description of communal discernment, describing it as

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209   Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 110.

a process for which the members of a Christian community gather to prayerfully exercise their faith, in the hope of discovering binding spiritual direction for the sake of faithful action.

This statement may have at first appeared as somewhat nondescript, lacking colour and nuance. However, in light of the first three chapters, the proposition above can now function like the skeleton that holds together a variety of different communal discernment processes. Followers of Christ gathering to exercise their faith resonates with those approaches that are intent on keeping the special case of discernment in continuity with the ordinary, prayerful life in which faith is exercised every day in prayerful listening to the scriptures and the Spirit. Exercising faith for the sake of discovering binding spiritual direction is then understood not merely as a special event but an extension of the prayerful, discerning life.

The main practices that characterise the process of corporate discernment, prayerful listening to God, others and self, in tandem with being aware and present to God, self and others, consulting and contemplating the Scriptures are understood as a multi-directional form of listening. The stories that are shared in support of the discernment process are, among other things, the personal narratives of faith woven together with the narratives that speak of experiences of God in the sacred texts. These communicative practices could be called 'interaction-before-God' or 'interaction-in-the-presence-of-God'. When all the information is considered as happening 'before God', it can be considered a sacred or spiritual practice. Interaction with God and interaction with others, as was demonstrated, became less and less distinguishable. Prayerful listening and speaking, relinquishing personal agendas before God and before one another, fused into one climate of interaction. Thus all interactions that are part of the communal discernment process have taken on the character of spiritual practices.

Personal and communal prayer is conceived of as a form of communication that by the Spirit creates some measure of communion with God. This sense of communion often occurs in moments of silence and affects the relationship with each discerning member. When separate persons who experience a sense of communion turn into persons-in-relation this

sense of communion eventually spreads like 'a spiritual infection' into the entire community. Communion is here meant as a concrete state of relating and connecting in which many of the usual barriers and defences that exist in human communities, such as vying for control, the need for approval and acceptance, fear of closeness, fear of being hurt, mistrust, broken and aggravated relationships, etc. are lowered, if not removed and the receptivity towards the Spirit is enhanced. When the sense of being deeply interconnected with one another is enveloped in the tangible perception of the presence of the divine communion, then spiritual and human interactions are no longer distinguishable and the right conditions for receiving genuine spiritual direction have emerged. In my second set of propositions I sought to describe this very situation. I suggested that

> *when a group gathers for a communal process of discernment or faith-based decision making, all facets of interacting change from being casual, arbitrary and habitual toward becoming a potential arena for the Spirit's promptings. Because of the prayerful, Spirit-influenced nature of the interactions that are part of the communal discernment process every aspect of interaction eventually takes on the character of a spiritual practice.*

The literature says a lot about the relational environment that enables the sacred moments of reaching clarity or finding a way forward. Prayerful interaction as a spiritual practice central for the process of communal discernment does not necessarily manifest on its own. It requires the discipline of resisting distractions, abandoning reactivity towards others' weaknesses and keeping the focus on the Spirit's activity, rather than on personal agendas, likes and dislikes. This is where the abovementioned formation and training have an important role to play. Training provides discerning persons with formational integration, self awareness and other additional tools that will enable them to help a community to become a truly discerning group, without coercion. From moments of sacred inter-connection, from a faith-filled, God-directed, relational environment, discernment as a shared outcome can emerge. Arriving at the sense of having 'made a discernment', as Prechtel called it, not only leads to faithful action, but it also releases a new found language that speaks tentatively of shared sacred knowledge, of having

literally received spiritual direction.[210] This sacred knowledge has been accumulated through the ongoing practice of heightened sensitivity to the Spirit of God, through careful, Spirit-focused listening to words and to silences between words, perceiving something utterly fleeting that most often remains invisible and inaudible to the senses, yet imprints itself onto a person's and community's spiritual awareness. As personal discernment is a work of faith, so communal discernment as an outcome is an embodiment of a community's faith. In remembering Bateson's definition of the relationship as being what happens *between* two interacting parties, communal discernment can be understood as a corporate exercise of practicing faith together leading to a discovery of different kinds of interactions between participants and the Spirit of God – personally and corporately. The emerging realities signify a breaking in of new manifestations of God's Reign. They lead to new relationships with the surrounding world. In this sense, prayerful discernment is not a stagnant form of communal self-concern, but a vibrant tool for the renewal of missional practice.

After considering communal discernment in the contemporary literature and contemporary practices it must be noted that most of the current models of discernment have their roots in ancient Christian practices. Therefore, in the chapters that follow I will explore the roots of discernment and follow the development of spiritual direction in decision making from its origins to the present time. This will necessarily involve the discussion of key scriptures, the practices of desert fathers and mothers, the formation of discernment in the monastic context and the development of discernment in Protestant traditions. Ignatian and Friend's and Reformed traditions will receive a more extended treatment due to the fact that they feature prominently in current practices. I will then turn to the treatment of the Uniting Church's *Manual for Meetings* which had some of its roots in secular grass roots consensus procedures.

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210 John Ackerman differentiates between a language that is *about* knowledge and a language *of* knowledge. The latter "is our response to life and God: it is the language often beyond words in joy, music, poetry, and spirituality. It is the language of listening and contemplation." John Ackerman, *Listening to God*, 9.

Chapter 4. The Roots of Communal Discernment in the Scriptures

In this chapter I will visit a selection of texts from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures that have shaped some of the practices of communal discernment as they are practiced today. However, the reasons for investigating the scriptures are not confined to authenticating current discernment practices. This chapter will bring to the fore some of the more radical features of discernment that are often forgotten in the Church's decision making, such as the role of history, the impact of injustice, the influence of local culture and the teachings of Jesus. Attending to some of the central narratives of the scriptures pertaining to discernment will help the Church to pray the scriptures more diligently, conform itself to its teachings more closely and thus hear the Spirit speak more clearly. Rather than venturing into texts with a historical-critical perspective I will treat the texts in their narrative thrust and "allow the [narratives] of the past and the [narratives] of the present to enter mutual interpretation," as Johnson has proposed.[211] In line with the two key propositions, I will continue to gather evidence for the gathered community searching for spiritual guidance and for ordinary interactions to be transformed into spiritual practices.

During the early beginnings of the Christian Church the men and women who formed the first faith communities found themselves faced with the challenges of decision making with regard to two major tasks. The first consisted in creating a functional structure that would support the leading of a fruitful life as a Christian community while awaiting Christ's return. The second task required finding ways of sharing the gift of Christ's salvation with others, that is implementing Christ's call to mission. The process of aligning themselves with what they discerned as God's will became a constant in both of these enterprises as some of the texts below will confirm.

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211   Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 32.

Selected texts on discernment in the Hebrew Scriptures

The Christian communities, especially in and around Jerusalem and sprouting up in the region of Galilee consisted in large parts of converted Jews. Hearing expositions of the scrolls of the Law and the Prophets had profoundly contributed to the foundation from which the early Jewish Christians interpreted the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and the events surrounding his death and resurrection appearances. Some exemplary passages from the book of Deuteronomy and the prophet Jeremiah provide important insights into how the people of Israel were able to discern that a prophet spoke an authentic word from God. These texts form part of the background from which the early Christians viewed the unfolding historic events that framed the life of the early emerging Church and will therefore be of interest here.

Discernment of a true prophet in Deuteronomy 13 and 18

The passage in Deuteronomy 13:1–5 is an extension of 12:29–32 in which the scenario of Israel invading a foreign country is discussed. The central concern of the passage is expressed in 12:30, which admonishes the Israelites not to imitate the way of life of the conquered culture, especially where worship is concerned. The last part of verse 30 instructs:

> do not inquire concerning their gods, saying, 'How did these nations worship their gods? I also want to do the same. (NRSV)

The purpose for this instruction is to ensure the Israelites' ability to live in keeping with the first commandment, that is, not to have any other gods apart from the Lord their God who hates other gods and jealously guards the purity of the Israelites' devotion to him (verse 31). The first verses of chapter 13 strictly regulate the Israelites' exchange with local foreign prophets:

> [1]If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and promise you omens or portents, [2]and the omens or the portents declared by them take place, and they say, 'Let us follow other gods' (whom you have not known) 'and let us serve them', [3]you must not heed the words of those prophets or those who divine by dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you indeed love the Lord your God

with all your heart and soul. [4]The Lord your God you shall follow, him alone you shall fear, his commandments you shall keep, his voice you shall obey, him you shall serve, and to him you shall hold fast. [5]But those prophets or those who divine by dreams shall be put to death for having spoken treason against the Lord your God—who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery—to turn you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. (NRSV)

False prophets in this culture speak through dreams and even if their predictions come true, they only serve to lead the Israelites astray, that is, to entice them in being interested in other gods. Instead, God wants the people only to listen to those words God puts into the mouths of divinely selected prophets (Deuteronomy 18:18). Should other prophets dare to speak in God's name without proper authorization, their fate is death (Deuteronomy 18:19–20). Israel is confronted with a radical rule of segregation. Reminding the Israelites of God's liberating actions as they were brought out from Egypt, serves as authorisation of God's exclusive claim of being solely worshipped. God can demand exclusive devotion because God has proven God's own faithfulness in the saving acts of the exodus. The text then asks and answers the all important question:

[21]You may say to yourself, 'How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?' [22]If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.

The simplicity of the logic of "proof" of authenticity is striking. If the prophecy does not come to pass, God was not part of it. If it eventuates, the prophecy was authentic. This contradicts earlier statements that foreign prophets' 'prophecies' may well yield concrete results. But because they were achieved through divining dreams, not through a direct proclamation of a divine word, they must be ignored.

True and false prophets in Jeremiah 27 and 28

The acts of false prophets are recognised as an issue early in book of Jeremiah, in chapter 14. The chapter begins with God instructing the prophet not to intercede on behalf of the people. God has turned away from the people, rejecting their acts of sacrifice and proclaiming judgement through famine, war and disease. The prophet responds by pointing to those prophets who are predicting to the people, "You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you true peace in this place." (Jeremiah 14:13)

While in chapter 14 the punishment for the people's lack of obedience was expressed in general terms as threat of famine, war and pestilence, in chapters 27 and 28, the circumstances are more specific. The Lord's words to Jeremiah are dated at the onset of King Zedekiah's reign, approximately 597–587,[212] and they concern the king's surrender to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Jeremiah is told to make a yoke and place it onto his neck as a sign of a yoke that is to come (27:2) in the life of Israel. Then the Lord reveals to Jeremiah that the control over an entire region is to fall into the hands of the Babylonian ruler and, most importantly, that this is the Lord's own doing (27:4–7). All rulers of the region are to surrender to Nebuchadnezzar, not only Zedekiah. This is the unequivocal message of God that Jeremiah has to proclaim. It was an unpopular message that went in every way against the grain of public and royal expectations.

In the same year that Jeremiah began his public proclamation of surrender to Nebuchadnezzar, another prophet, named Hananiah stepped out into the public arena. In the public sphere of the temple, Hananiah uses the same formulaic prophetic authorisation as he prophesies to the people: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel" (28:2), that Jeremiah spoke. Only, Hananiah's message spoke of the exact opposite, the "breaking of the yoke" of the Babylonian king, the returning of the looted valuables and of the coming home of the exiled Israelite king. Hananiah then went a step further by taking the yoke from Jeremiah's neck and breaking it apart in a dramatic public gesture to lend weight to his message (28:10). Jeremiah did not argue with Hananiah, but quotes the principle of a true prophet outlined in chapter 14: A true

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212 See Marvin A. Sweeney, 'Jeremiah, Book of'. 686–689. In: D.N. Freedman, A.C. Myers, A.B. Beck, (eds.), *Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible.* Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000, 686.

prophet is known by the events he predicts to come true (28:5–9). At first glance, it looks as if Jeremiah agrees with Hananiah. But then, the story takes another turn and it is becoming clear that Hananiah's actions only made matters worse for Israel. The wooden yoke is now replaced with an iron yoke (28:12–14), as Jeremiah reveals. But then he brings a word of judgement for Hananiah:

> 'Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you made his people trust in a lie. Therefore thus says the Lord: 'I am going to send you off the face of the earth. Within this year you will be dead, because you have spoken rebellion against the Lord.' (28:16)

Chapter 28 ends with a the sober note, "in that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died" (28:17).

From these passages the act of discerning a true from a false prophet proves to be more complex than it appeared at first. The Deuteronomic passages teach that a positive outcome is not always proof of authenticity, but that how an outcome is achieved matters more. This is especially the case when a community's faith in the one God is exposed to and therefore tempted by other faiths practiced in the surrounding cultures of recently conquered lands. The people's discernment must constantly be refocused on God by remembering the liberating, saving activity of God in Israel's life. The law, especially the first commandment, is given to the people to both know its own identity in distinction from other peoples' and to recognise God who resides at the heart of all aspects of its life and worship.

The texts from the book of the prophet Jeremiah illustrate how the unpopular message of surrendering to a foreign king is at first pushed aside by a message of peace which appears in the same prophetic trappings as the unpopular one. The scope of Hananiah's thinking could not fathom a God who would deliver his own people into exile and into being controlled by a Babylonian king. But in the end, as in Deuteronomy, a true prophet is known by the events coming to pass as predicted. In doubt, there are times when only the wisdom of hindsight reveals the truth of a prophetic proclamation. Israel's years in Babylonian exile sadly confirmed the authenticity of Jeremiah's words from God. The Hebrew scriptures display practices of

discernment that are closely linked with God's People's faithfulness to the Law and its obedience to the words of the true prophets. Where discernment failed in either, the consequences were usually catastrophic. In the paragraphs to come I will show, that in spite of the presence of discerning leadership figures, who act similarly to these Old Testament prophets, in the New Testament, the act and process of discernment became increasingly the work of all the faithful.

Discernment in the New Testament

Early Christian communities showed a surprising procedural variety in the methods they chose to make productive decisions in their desire to live in alignment with what they were able to perceive as God's will for them. The Book of Acts displays a particular diversity of methods ranging from praying and casting the lots (Acts 1:24–26)[213], to using dreams (Acts 10:9–47), visions (Acts 9), voices of the Lord, voices of angels (Acts 12:7) and the direct influence of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–11; 8:26). These means acted both as conduits for direct divine intervention and vehicles for giving divine guidance. When Paul began to write his pastoral letters, he often reminded the recipients "to be in one mind" (1 Cor. 2:16; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 2:2, 2:5, 3:15, 4:2; Rm. 15:5) and to discern God's will together from within the context of complete dedication to the new life they had found in Christ (Rm. 12:1–2). These scriptures alone indicate the importance of the practice of discernment in a variety of contexts and for a variety of reasons. As I explore the meaning of discernment in more detail, these contexts and purposes will be described in more detail.

The meaning of the term "discernment"

The prefix "*dis*" means "asunder" or "apart" and *cernere* means "to see" or "to perceive".[214] New Testament scholar Bonnie Bowman Thurston relates the Latin word *discernere* to the Greek verb *krino*, denoting "judge", "decide", "to determine", "to resolve" but also "put asunder" and

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213 "The casting of sacred lots (variously called Urim and Thummim, the ark, or Ephod, 1 Sam. 14; 1 Sam. 30:7–8; and Num. 27:21) was used by the priests of Israel, probably employing a question and answer format." See Prechtel, *To have the Mind of Christ*, 13.

214 See Bonnie Bowman Thurston, 'The Early Church Finds Its Way: Discernment in the Acts of the Apostles.' 3–8. In: *Hungry Hearts*. Winter 2002, Volume XI, No. 4, 3. At http://www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation/hungryhearts/win02-hh.pdf Accessed 07/02/2008.

"separate".[215] She points out an older meaning of *krino* which originates in a rural setting, meaning "sifting, shaking out the chaff and retaining the flour."[216] Yet another facet of *krino* comes from the popular pagan practice of seeking the advice of an oracle. Here a "response of an oracle" is understood as a "judgment of the gods." In this context then, the word meant "to submit to the judgment of the gods".[217] From Latin and Greek backgrounds Bowman Thurston identifies three strands of meaning for the verb "to discern": (1) "to perceive with the eyes or the intellect, to recognize or comprehend mentally the various parts of something", (2) "to sift out what is not useful to have what is useful in full view"[218] and (3) to submit to a divine judgment. Further shades of meaning are added by the derivative of *krino*, *diakrino*, translated as "to judge" or "to distinguish" and the verb *dokimazo*, which is frequently translated as "to test" and "to try".[219] These terms will supply a useful field of meaning that can be traced through a number of different texts.

Diakrinein meaning "to discern"

In its active form the verb *diakrino* is used eight times in the New Testament as a stronger form of *krino*, in the sense of "to distinguish between persons".[220] I will discuss those references which relate most clearly to the issue of communal discernment.

Diakrinein meaning "reading the signs of the time"

In Mt. 16:1–4 the reader finds a story in which Jesus addresses the Pharisees and Sadducees who sought to test (*peirazo*) him by asking him for a sign. In his response, Jesus uses the daily activity of the weather forecast by scanning the sky as a vehicle for his scathing critique of their inability to "read" the signs of the times. In verse 3 he says, "You know how to interpret (*diakrinein*) the

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215   Ibid., 3.

216   Ibid., 3.

217   For this finding Bowman Thurston refers to J. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980, 360. Ibid., 3.

218   Ibid., 3.

219   See Walter Grundmann's explanation of '*dokimazo*'. In: *TDNT*, Volume II, 256. (ed.) Gerhard Kittel. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964 and 1983, 260.

220   See Friedrich Büchsel's article on '*krino*' of which '*diakrino*' is a derivative. In: *TDNT*, Volume III, 946–947. (ed.) Gerhard Kittel. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964 and 1983.

appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times." This passage offers the meaning for '*discerning*' as "reading or interpreting a set of signs correctly". Being unable to read the signs of the times left the Pharisees and Sadducees displaced as the first receivers of the Messiah's message of repentance. It effectively prevented them from taking the opportunity of a key role in God's history of salvation. Proper discernment of the signs of the time, especially the sign of the public appearance of Jesus of Nazareth would have placed them at the heart of God's initiative to renew the relationship with God's chosen people.

Matthew's critique of the Jews' inability to discern their place in God's history appears in a different light when examined in the Acts version on the same matter. The introductory verses of Acts 1:6–8 present the reader with the following conversation between Jesus and the disciples:

> ⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (NRSV)

Whilst for Matthew the Jews' ignorance of the signs of the times was related to resistance caused by their blinding adherence to the traditional sources of knowledge, in Acts, knowing the exact course of history is God's exclusive privilege. However, the disciples are promised the Holy Spirit, not as a pair of spectacles that will give them omniscience about "the times and periods", but as an empowerment for the proclamation of the Good News. Their place in God's history is to be witnesses of God's saving love which had already been foreshadowed in Christ at the end of Luke's Gospel, in 28:48. There is a view of Jesus in Luke that clearly "shifts the focus from "knowledge" to mission".[221]

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221   Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles.* Sacra Pagina Series, volume 5. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992, 29.

Communal discernment in Acts

In the book of Acts the reader encounters a number of decisive events, some of which show elements of communal discernment, for example, the election of Matthias (1:15–26) and the so called council at Jerusalem in chapter 15. These texts are a testimony to the process of how, in tandem with the work of the Spirit, the first Jewish Christians transcended theological divisions and cultural constraints that had guaranteed their exclusive status as chosen people of God. They instead decide to become an inclusive, vibrant, culturally and ethnically diverse community of Jesus' disciples. Discerning the way forward was a matter of being obedient to God's promptings and messages, against the grain of their own divisive values and rules.[222] I will venture briefly outside of this word study, to reflect on two discernment events that highlight some of the emerging communal discernment practices as they were recorded in the Acts of the Apostles.

Ernst Haenchen has aptly summarised the relationship between the gospel of Luke and Luke's account of the history of the early church in the book of Acts as follows:

> Here [in the message concerning Jesus] then is the clamp which fastens the two eras together and justifies, indeed demands, the continuation of the first book (depicting the life of Jesus as a time of salvation) in a second; for the salvation which has appeared must be preached to all peoples, and the very portrayal of this mission will serve the awakening of belief, and hence attainment of that salvation.[223]

In this conclusion Haenchen draws together Luke's theological outlook and his emphasis on the relationship between salvation and mission. In the same way as Jesus was the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets, the Messiah sent to save the lost, the church is now sent to proclaim the message of the risen Christ, thus fulfilling its own calling in Luke's version of the great commission (Lk. 24:48–49). The texts that give accounts of crucial moments of decision making need to be viewed in this light.

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222 Ibid., 15 and 26.

223 Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles. A Commentary*. Translated from the 14th German edition by Bernhard Noble and Gerald Shinn. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971, 98. First insert is mine.

The story of the election of Matthias in Acts 1:15–26 addresses the fact that Judas' suicide had left a vacancy among the twelve. The text begins with a sermon-like preface, in which Peter narrates the circumstances that made this election necessary. He summarises the fate of Judas who despite of the fact that Jesus chose him to be one of the apostles, lost his way, ended his life and left an opening that had to be filled. The replacement was chosen from a group that had followed Jesus closely, Joseph, also called Barsabbas and Justus, also called Matthias. The process of election is simple. A prayer of relinquishment is spoken that places the outcome into the domain of God's action. The decision is then made by casting a lot. Discernment in this instance relates to achieving the right inner posture or attitude. Once every participant has placed himself under the authority of God's action, any element of competition is removed and the final result is accepted as divinely intended without further debate. Surprisingly, despite its efficiency, praying and casting lots as a means of communal discernment does not develop into common practice. It remains a unique occurrence at the beginning of Acts.

The other text that shows rich detail in terms of a communal discernment process is found is Acts chapter 15, the famous passage that describes the council of Jerusalem. A controversy broke out in Antioch over the extent to which gentile converts should abide by the Jewish Law. Some Jewish Christians taught the gentile Christians in Antioch that converts should be circumcised according to the custom of Moses. Paul and Barnabas disputed this. The issue created serious tensions. Paul, Barnabas and some others were dispatched to Jerusalem to settle the question with the apostles once and for all. Paul and Barnabas are not portrayed as the key speakers on the matter. This role falls to Peter. But there is mention of converts who formerly belonged to the Pharisees and who insisted on circumcision. A serious 'hearing' ensued. Peter rose to argue for the equality between Jews and Gentiles, questioning the wisdom of "putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear." (15:10) Peter's retelling of the story of salvation through Christ is a moving and timely reminder which was followed by Paul's and Barnabas' testimony "of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles" (15:12) to which the entire assembly listened in silence. Then James took the lead, quoting from the scriptures to strengthen a new direction. He suggested to impose only a minimum of rules on the Gentiles and concludes, "that

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we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood," (15:20). The pastoral letter that is sent out to the newly converted Christians in Antioch, Cilicia and Syria explains the new rules and offers an authoritative seal of approval in the turn of phrase, "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose you no further burden than these essentials." (15:28)

Luke Timothy Johnson, in his commentary on the book of Acts[224] has underlined the significance of Peter's summary of the faith. He found it instrumental for the final outcome of the council at Jerusalem. Johnson poses that

> Luke enables the reader to see the early Church reaching decision by means of an articulation of its faith, as a process of discernment of God's activity. … Here Peter does not appear as the judge but as another witness, whose story of how God himself "bore witness" to the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit "just as he had to us".[225]

But this incident of communal discernment reveals a further feature. Sharing the narrative of faith is followed by the reinterpretation of the scriptures. James prefaces his quote of Amos 9:11–12 with the words "This agrees with the words of the prophets" (15:35). By connecting the state of the debate with the authoritative words of the prophet Amos, James discerns a way forward as he interprets the prophet in light of the emerging missional realities. The fact that this conflict had to be resolved for the sake of the unity of a fledgling, culturally diverse church, gave birth to a new track of thinking about the scriptures. In this innovative way of interpretation the activity of the Spirit is implied, even if it is only expressed in a small sentence, "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." It is perhaps in the deep listening in which the assembly in Jerusalem immersed itself and in the courageous reframing of the traditional reading of scripture that the Spirit was able to move the assembly to a new place, which found its expression in James' reinterpretation of the prophet Amos' words and in the first instructive, pastoral letter to the Gentiles.[226]

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224 Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 271.

225 Ibid., 271.

226 Johnson offers the view that the communal discernment enacted in Acts 15 shows four central elements that have to be present for discernment to result in a constructive decision. Ibid., 272.

Diakrinein meaning "recognising the body and blood of Christ"

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians provides further clues to the nature of communal discernment.[227] In this letter Paul addresses a series of problems strung loosely together as critique and encouragement, admonishment, theological correction and analysis of fault, followed by practical instructions. Joseph Fitzmyer insists that Paul is not addressing an assortment of splinter groups but "the Corinthian community as a whole." He recognises, "that there are diverse groups within the community, but his aim is to recall such groups to unity, and so he addresses them all equally and at the same time".[228] A variety

> of ethnic groups and socially stratified groups, people of diverse status (men, women, slaves, free, rich, poor) … have been reacting against him, … [and] have, in effect not only been undermining his authority, but have been watering down the gospel that he has been preaching.[229]

The conflicts that are brewing among the various groups relate to competing followers of different teachers, matters of improper sexual conduct, cultic food laws and petty litigation, all of which paint a picture of a Christian community torn apart by opposing interest groups and personalities. Paul's letter contains more than a list of pragmatic practical instructions on how to resolve conflict and get on with one another. He addresses each problem in turn and then details a series of theological responses. To the instructions of practical behaviour changes he offers theological reflections or faith-based reasoning for such changes. He supplies the Corinthians with a spiritual language to find their way out of the fracturing of the community. Paul avoids clever philosophy or the application of timeless wisdom, but recommends to the fighting factions to turn their attention to the image of Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:17, 18 and 23). In doing so he seeks to impress on the Corinthians that the one who unites them in faith will also unite

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227 The following reflections summarise material from Peter Richardson. 'Corinthians, First Letter To the.' 281–285. In: David Noel Friedman (ed.), *Eerdman Dictionary of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000; Victor Paul Furnish. 'Corinthians, the First Letter of Paul to the.', 202–204. In: Paul J. Achtemeier, (ed.), *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*. New York: HarperOne, 1996; Joseph Fitzmyer, SJ, *First Corinthians. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Yale Bible. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008 and Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians. A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. Translated by James W. Leitch. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975.

228 Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 52.

229 Ibid., 53.

them in their conflict-laden relationships as a human community. The scandal of the cross can generate the kind of humility which has the power to precipitate peace with one another. To that end Paul shares several passages of challenging theological reflection, an inspiring hymn on love (chapter 13) and other directive theological insights. In doing so he attempts to settle quarrels about disrespectful behavior around the Lord's Supper (chapter 11), the proper conduct during worship (chapters 12 and 14), and doubts about the historicity of the resurrection (chapter 15).[230]

The famous passage of 1 Cor. 11:17ff shows a facet of the verb *diakrinein* in which Paul scolds the Corinthians about the way the rich members of the congregation treat the poor during the celebration of the Lord's Supper. He holds up a mirror to them as he reflects on the situation:

> [17]Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together, it is not for the better but for the worse. [18]For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. [19]Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. [20]When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper. [21]For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. [22]What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you. (vv23–26 *Narrative of the institution*) [27]Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. [28]Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. [29]For all who eat and drink without discerning the body (*me diakrinon to soma*), eat and drink judgment against themselves. (NRSV)

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230   Ibid., 52–53. Conzelmann qualifies Paul's letter as an example of "practicing applied theology" rather than a systematic theological treatise. The way in which Paul argues for the reversal of social relations from the reversal of God's own power to powerlessness in the event of the cross (1 Cor. 11:18ff) gives credence to his claim. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 9.

Paul's admonishment entails a description of how the Lord's Supper had disintegrated into an excess of eating and drinking which left those who had little to share excluded. Verse 28 is particularly important as a depiction of the deterioration of care for which Paul scolds the Corinthians with the words, "For all who eat and drink without discerning (*diakrinon*) the body, eat and drink judgment (*krima*) against themselves." In his critique Paul establishes a strong link between the way in which positions of power and rank are acted upon and the members' ability of recognising or *discerning* bread and wine as Christ's body and blood. To discern, i.e. to honour, bread and wine as body and blood of Christ must effectively eliminate the existing social differential. Partaking in the body and blood of Christ directly works as a social equaliser, inaugurating a different set of relationships based on mutual care and respect in Christ. No longer were there to be rich or poor, only followers of Christ. Those who were not discerning bread and wine as Christ's body and blood, but treated it as an ordinary meal, during which they continued to enact the social rules of rank and wealth of the contemporary Greek society, in fact, committed a *krima*, a crime, which was to attract severe divine judgment. In constructing an identity between discerning, e.g. honouring Christ's body and blood and relationships of respect, mutual care and equality, Paul links the sacred character of the commemorative meal with the whole social structure of the community. There is no "outside" life that is different from the worship life of the community. All of life is to be drawn into and changed by the discernment of Christ's body and blood.

In this context the verb *diakrino* denotes the meaning of distinguishing between a sacred equalising of relationships and a profane social differential defined by wealth and social rank. This kind of discernment focused on the recognition of the Lord's Supper instituted to keep the community connected with the redemptive narrative and presence of its spiritual founder, the crucified and resurrected Christ. These new social rules were not rooted in Paul's own tradition's sense of propriety, but in the authority of the one from whom Paul received the narrative, Christ himself. Conzelmann emphasises that by grounding the Lord's Supper in Christ himself, Paul ensures "the immediacy of its origin".[231] Christ himself is the one who enlivens the sacramental meal with his spiritual presence each time it is consumed. The participants accept

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231   Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 198.

his spiritual presence in the attitude and act of honouring, that is remembering him accordingly. By instructing the Corinthian community with a narrative (23–26) that contains a liturgical sequence, Paul not only provided authoritative teaching but also offered the Corinthians a practical process for setting up a transformative, sacred relational space in which the new patterns of interaction could be practiced. Thus by discerning bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ *together* – his spiritual presence with them then and there and the reality of his salvific work – a communal ethos of mutual respect, care and equality were inaugurated and sustained. To discern the body was to become the body.

Diakrinein meaning "having the mind of Christ" and "being the body of Christ"

As already mentioned, in 1 Cor. 1 and 2 Paul dealt with the issue of competing leadership cliques. He rerouted the factions' attention back onto Christ, his life, death and resurrection, establishing the paradox reversal of power and powerlessness, wisdom and foolishness for both Greek and Jewish philosophical convictions and cultural norms. At the end of chapter 1 Paul reiterates the core of his message like this:

> [23]We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, [24]but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. [25]For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (NRSV)

He finishes his discussion at the end of chapter 2 by exclaiming:

> But we have the mind of Christ!

His assertion is made in the face of evidence to the contrary. It is at once an exhortation, admonishment, encouragement and a creedal statement of faith. It comes at the end of a long list of questions and challenges which put people and issues in their place, within the context of God's upside down perspective of human wisdom and divine foolishness. Success and failure,

weakness and strength, power and helplessness are reversed in relation to the culture and values of Paul's environment.

The holy confusion of social rules and social status brought about by these reversals continues to dislocate the Corinthians' cultural base and move them to a place of proper hearing, the kind of hearing that results in the actions that create a Christ-centred and Christ-shaped communal, relational environment. By adjusting to the reversal of values the Corinthians change shape from a group of competing, dispersed, self-focused believers into Christ's body. Christ's body honours the weak and invites participation and collaboration of all, regardless of age, race, gender or status. This is the specific meaning of "having the mind of Christ." [232]

Following his discourse on discerning the Lord's Supper in chapter 11, Paul explains a new paradigm of being community together within which an evolving equality can be sustained, namely as one body with different members. Collaboration, acceptance of differences among equals and solicitous care for the weak are the hallmarks of this new communal paradigm. But the culmination of Paul's exposition consists in this statement:

> Now, you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (12:27)

Paul not only spiritually incorporates the Corinthians into the mind of Christ, with practical consequences for the way in which they treat one another, but he also opens up a *communal ontology* of "*being the body of Christ together*" (*hymeis de este soma Christou*) with radical implications for the formation and functioning of the whole community. In doing so, Paul reconstructs faith in communal terms without losing the reality of personal faith. Paul effectively says, 'You all are one body, but each one of you is an individual member.' Because in his design of *being Christ together*, the notion of Christ as "head" is absent, the ontological dimension of the faith of the community is not obstructed by hierarchical connotations and therefore comes to

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232 "Having the mind of Christ" was later carefully exegeted by Maximus the Confessor (580–662) as follows: "The mind of Christ which the saints receive according to the saying, "We have the mind of Christ", comes along not by any loss of our mental power, nor as a supplementary mind to ours, nor as essentially and personally passing over into our mind, but rather as illuminating the power of our mind with its own quality and bringing the same energy to it. For to have the mind of Christ is, in my opinion, to think in his way and of him in all situations. Rather than becoming mental clones of Christ, Maximus suggests to engage the spiritual imagination as part of an intimate spiritual relationship with him." In: Maximus the Confessor, *Chapters on Knowledge*, 2.83 in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. George C. Berthold. New York: Paulist Press, 1985, 165. Quoted in Mark A. McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth. The Spirituality And Theology of Knowledge*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company. A Herder & Herder Book, 2004, 128.

the fore more sharply. "You have the mind of Christ" expands into "[y]ou are the body of Christ" resulting in a community that embodies Christ *together*. From the communal embodiment of Christ emanates a right way of relating, or a kind of *ortho-relational* environment which defines and guides any worship gathering, mission and service, and which impacts on every organisational structure and every decision-making procedure. This is the root stock from which the expressions of Christian life grow into their offshoots and to this root they are pared back when relationships become distorted. By outlining such new relational ethos, Paul offered the Corinthians a way out of their social and spiritual inertia which had reflected their inability to translate their new found faith into transformed relationships.

In the verses of chapter 12 Paul's theological construction of a faithful community is articulated. He spells out how an entire community can create a social and spiritual fabric through the way *they are Christ together*. The Corinthians were in dire need of his instructions. On their own they had been unable to move forward. By behaving in the manner conducive to a body of Christ with many members that work together in love for the sake of making Christ's presence visible in the world, the Corinthians began to participate in Christ's innermost being. They began to show signs of self-giving love, foolish, powerless, yet risen, transformative divine love. Where the sacramentally grounded discernment process is working, inappropriate motives, agendas, alliances and attachments are sifted out and shaken loose by the movements of the Spirit. The Spirit thus creates congruence between human behaviour, God's values and Christ's agenda. Paul finely balances the functions and roles of individuals (foot, hand, ear, eye) with the need to be in a collaborative relationship with one another. The emphasis here is not on exercising individual functions or gifts, but how each person can become part of the other, how many different persons can work together as one.[233]

From these passages of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians it was possible to glean vital theological clues for an understanding of where the discerning community is grounded, namely,

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233 The focus on unity had already been expressed in the introduction to chapter 12:4–11, where Paul emphasised the diversity of gifts unified by the same Spirit. Exercising these gifts without the unifying Spirit and without a solid understanding of the body's connectivity led precisely to the kind of conflict the Corinthians were caught up in.

in honouring the body and blood of Christ, and how it is embodied in its life together, namely as being Christ together. Paul explains that to discern the body of Christ is to become his body.

Diakriseis meaning "discernment of Spirits"

There is an additional meaning to the verb *diakrino* which is found in chapters 12 and 14 of Paul's letter to the Corinthians. It relates to exercising a particular spiritual gift, i.e. the discernment of spirits, *diakriseis ton pneumaton*. In the passage of 1 Cor. 12:8–11 the discernment of spirits is simply listed among other manifestations (note the use of the word *phanerosis* not *charismata*) of the Spirit, such as the utterance of wisdom, the utterance of knowledge, faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits (9), different kinds of tongues and interpretation of tongues. The plural "*spirits*" suggests a meaning, such as "to identify the origins and motivations of something that is said or done", that is, to discern where a statement or an action comes from.

From Paul's list in 1 Cor. 12:4ff it remains unclear what issues exactly needed to be traced back to their proper origin or motivation. 'Discernment of spirits' was not further explained. However, the fact that discernment of spirits is included in the list headed by the triad of gifts (*charismata*), services (*diaikoinion*) and activities or works (*energemata*) all of which had their origin in the one Spirit, it can simply be concluded that Paul in *diakriseis ton pneumaton* is referring to a Spirit-led activity in kind, manifesting during communal worship meetings.

Because this turn of phrase is frequently used in the context of discernment, I will explore further how it was used in the early church. In his article 'On "Discernment of Spirits" in the Early Church',[234] Joseph T. Lienhard traces the changes in meaning of Paul's phrase across a variety of patristic sources. His aim is to retrieve the proper meaning of discernment, communal discernment and discernment of spirits for those involved in Ignatian discernment practices which will be treated in more depth later. The relevance of Lienhard's article concerns the way

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234   Joseph T. Lienhard, 'On "Discernment of Spirits" in the Early Church' 505–529.
       At: http://www.ts.mu.edu/content/41/41.3/41.3.2.pdf Accessed 13/11/2010.

in which the term "discernment of spirits" was used in the early church.[235] Lienhard reports that "discernment of spirits" is discussed in the writings of the Greek and Latin Fathers "in two categories of works, exegetical and ascetical".[236] Whilst the exegetes of Antioch understood Paul as saying that only some Christians in Corinth had the gift of discernment of spirits, the Latin theologians, following the Ambrosiaster, determined that only clergy possessed it. Athanasius, in his *Life of Anthony* concluded that discernment was the result of intense ascetic struggle. It marked the advanced stage this sage had accomplished. In the emerging monastic era discernment was increasingly regarded as an essential gift for the monks. But its meaning changed from spiritual charism to necessary monastic virtue. For the *Apophthegmata patrum*, Cassian and Benedict, discernment of spirits became discernment or discretion, meaning a form of superior insight exercised in acting or deciding".[237] In the writings of Evagrius Ponticus, who was a follower of Origen, discernment is changing into a "virtue or technique needed by every ascetic to prevent him [or her] from falling victim to excess or bad judgment".[238] Lienhard summarises, "for Origen, [it was] calm and freedom; for Athanasius, joy and confidence; in the life of Pachomius, absence of doubt; for Diadochus, unmixed consolation which leads to love". [239] Despite these variations in use and interpretation, as already stated above, discernment of spirits in the context of Paul's writings remains largely undefined.

Diakrinein meaning "discerning prophetic utterings"

In 1 Corinthians 14:29 the verb *diakrino* is used in conjunction with the spiritual gift of prophesying. Paul instructs the congregation as follows:

> Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others (*hoi alloi*) weigh what is said.

The meaning of *diakrino* here is "weighing" and "interpreting", perhaps in the sense of "pondering" and "considering". Paul's take on the work of the prophet in the congregation focuses on the "predominantly ethical and hortatory character" and it primarily refers to the

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235 The following paragraph is a summary of Lienhard's conclusions on pages 528–529.

236 Ibid., 528.

237 Ibid., 529.

238 Ibid., 529.

239 Ibid., 529.

ministry of "teaching, admonishing and comforting".[240] Therefore, the activity of discerning in this context does not so much call for the task of authenticating,[241] but to the task of pondering, translating or interpreting of a prophetic uttering. Because the interpretation is undertaken by "the others", e.g. all those who have listened to the prophetic words, discernment is becoming a hermeneutic task performed by the whole community for the whole community.

Dokimazein meaning "discerning good and evil through the lens of the law"

In Romans chapter 2 Paul uses the verb *dokimazein* as part of a stinging polemic, in which he asks a long-winded rhetorical question of the Jews. Paul challenges the Jews' ability to discern God's will on the basis of their tradition. His challenge takes the form of a rhetorical question beginning with verse 17.

> If you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God and know his will and determine (*dokimazeis*) what is best because you are instructed in the law …

These verses provide the most specific description of the ancient Hebrew tradition of discerning God's will. They reveal the methodical instruction in God's law, the *mishphat*, the rule of life which results in "the ability to discern between good and evil". [242] Volkmar Herntrich highlights the nearly identical meaning of "law" and "judgment" and underlines the profoundly relational dimension of the *Mishphat Zhdaka*, the rules of the Just. These rules reveal a God "who in the covenant has bound himself to the people as its Lord and Judge," who "has thus revealed His will

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240 See Gerhard Friedrich's article '*prophetes*' D. Prophets and Prophecies in the New Testament. 828–861. In Gerhard Friedrich, (ed.), TDNT, Vol. VI. Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company,1968 and 1993, 829. Friedrich relates Paul's understanding of prophecy back to Acts 2, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The speaking in strange tongues (verse 4) is interpreted by Peter with a quote from Joel, identifying the speaking of tongues with prophesying (verse 17). In I Cor 14, Paul however draws a sharp distinction between speaking in tongues and prophesying. (851–852) There are two features that set prophesying above speaking in tongues: (1) prophesying builds up the congregation because it is given in a comprehensive language; (2) after two or three prophets have spoken, **the others discern** or interpret the meaning of their words. The interpretation of tongues can only be practised by the speaker or one other spiritually gifted person. The interpretation of prophecy falls into the competence of the whole congregation.

241 The translation of Friedrich's article uses the word "examiner", stating that the discerning congregation functions as an "examiner who assesses what is said by him" [e.g. the prophet], 852. If the German term here is "*prüfen*", a host of possibilities apply for a translation, depending on the context, for example, pondering, weighing, testing, comparing what is said with reality, etc.

242 See Volkmar Herntrich, Article '*mishphat*', in particular Part B. The OT Term *Mishphat*. 923–933. In: Gerhard Kittel, (ed.), TDNT Vol III. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965 and 1991, 926 and 927.

and who is just as concerned about the observance of this revealed will as He is about keeping the promise given in the covenant." This understanding of God's justice "stands diametrically opposed to that of a judge who gives judgment according to a specific norm on the basis of an *iustitia distributiva*", it rather stands for a "*iustitia salutifera*" which testifies to the salvific goal in God's justice. There is a parallel in Hebrews 5:14. Verses 12 and 13 need to be taken as context. The verb used here is *diakrinein*:

> [12]For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; [13]for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. [14]But solid food is for the mature, for those whose perceptive faculties have been trained (*gegymnasmena*) by practice (*hexin*) to distinguish (*diakrisin*) good from evil. (NRSV)

The text addresses the need for the newly converted Jewish Christians to be retrained in their understanding of the Law in light of the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection. The purpose of this process of relearning is to cultivate the ability to discern good and evil in light of the person and work of Christ. A similar use can be found in Rm. 14:22.

Dokimazein meaning "discerning what is good, (and) acceptable and perfect"

In Rm. 12:1–2 Paul uses the verb *dokimazo* again. This is an important text which requires closer examination. Chapter 12 marks the beginning of a new section in Paul's letter to the Romans. He has completed his complex and thorough theological reflections on the relationship between Israel and God and the newly converted Roman Christians and God. Chapter 11 had concluded with a doxology about the mysterious ways of God's work of salvation in the famous words:

> from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory. (NRSV)

The first two verses of chapter 12 function both as a heading and as a brief summary of the "normative program",[243] of what is to come in verses 3–21 through to chapter 15:13, namely, a "*paraklesis*", or an appeal to particular attitudes and behaviours that were imperative for the character of the Christian community of Rome.

Paul summarises the main message of his *paraklesis* in verses 1 and 2:

> [1]I appeal to you therefore, brothers (and sisters), by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. [2]Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern (*dokimazein*) what is the will of God, what is good, and acceptable and perfect. (NRSV)

The basis for the capacity to discern the will of God which is good, acceptable and perfect is not the internalised knowledge of the law, but a threefold process of intersecting activities: (1) offering up of the body (*soma*) as a sacrifice, (2) assuming an inner posture of difference or non-conformism in relation to the patterns that shape the world (*me synschematizo*) and (3) to allow for and undergo a process of changing shape, transformation (*metamorphosis*) through a renewal of the mind. Strictly speaking, the third point does not refer to an activity but an openness to or a permission giving attitude that will allow for such transformation to take place. Together, these three elements ensure that a new spiritual foundation is created for the daily life duty of conversion-oriented discernment.

The meaning of the word *soma*, found in 12:1, Käsemann warns, is not to "be flattened to a cipher for the person" … but to be recognised as "our being in relation to the world".[244] Stuhlmacher asserts the "always and everywhere" of the Christian life that is entailed in Paul's use of *soma* and explains:

> the "body" is the existence bestowed upon humankind by God, in which the creatures of God live with and for one another. Even if the flesh passes away, the body will be

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243 Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans. A Commentary*. Translated by Scott J. Hafemann. Westminster: John Knox Press, 1994, 189.

244 Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. London: SCM, 1980, 327.

resurrected (1 Cor. 15:33). The creatures' acts with and for one another will thus endure beyond death and the day of judgment. Those who believe, having been chosen by God for justification, already belong completely to him here on earth. Hence, their earthly worship of God cannot remain limited to special times of devotion, but must encompass the believers' entire life, including even one's daily acts of charity and manner of conduct. [245]

In his exegesis of *soma*, body, as distinct from flesh, Stuhlmacher suggests two dimensions that are inseparably interspersed: the spiritual and the embodied body, so to speak. In relation to the spiritual body the reader is not really to think of the anatomy of a human body, but to imagine the body as the "organ" for relating, or as Käsemann put it succinctly, imagine the spiritual body "as our being in relation to the world."[246]

A person transformed by the saving love of Christ undergoes a change that comes to affect each and every relationship. This change creates a new mode of relating from self-serving to self-giving, from a self-focused to a God-and-other-focused life. The vitality of this mode of relating is sustained by God's saving love but it becomes tangible in the world through a person's and community's loving actions in response. By using language that evokes images of the temple and ancient liturgies of sacrifice Paul anchors the process of discernment in the practice of worship, a worship that involves every aspect of the life of the Christian community and its individual members. Incidentally, in verse 4 Paul reiterates his theology of one body, many members, which has already been mentioned before in relation to 1 Corinthians 12. Such *metamorphosis* or change of mind is to affect and re-shape all interactions with the world and with one another. Discerning the will of God is not a one off event. Rather, it is the new constant in the new found faith. This practice of discernment does not occur in a vacuum, but in the context of a community that is corporately committed to loving one another in ways that Paul outlined in Rm. 12:3–21. Paul calls the Roman Christians to become a community of persons who distinguish themselves from the world that surrounds them. He instructs them not to conform

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245 Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 189.

246 Ibid., 327.

(*me synschematizo*) to the patterns of the world, not to assimilate the ways in which the world operates, but to be different. Stuhlmacher nuances this call to difference like this:

> It is no longer that which every person says and thinks which determines the Christian life. Rather, those who believe test … now oriented to Christ, what is really good and what is reprehensible from among all that is thought and desired.[247]

From the new relationship to God in Christ grows the ability to step away from public opinion and the power and status oriented values that rule society. The language that conjures up images of the temple and liturgies of sacrifice grounds both the process of discernment and the challenge of life together as Christian community in a new practice of worship. At the heart of this new worship there is no temple made from bricks and mortar, but a spiritual temple consisting of relationships, beginning with the relationship God has through Christ with the community, then the members with one another and with the world. The Christian community is not to distinguish itself through greater purity but by being a community of love. Discernment is here understood as a constant process of corporate and personal renewal in faith and life, as part of living the whole of life as active worship, a communal life that is permeated by divine love.

Dokimazein meaning "testing/discerning the Spirits" in 1 John 4

1 John 4:1–6 admonishes its readers as follows:

> [1]Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. [2]By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, [3]and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. [4]Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. [5]They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. [6]We are from

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247   Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans,* 189.

God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. (NRSV)

Echoing the Old Testament tradition of discerning a true from a false prophet, the Johannine writer instructs the readers to "test the spirits" (*dokimazete ta pneumata*) so as to not be captivated by the teachings of false prophets. However, the criterion for authenticity is not found in the congruence between prophecy and outcome, but in the prophet's act of confessing (*homologein*). Confessing "that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (*en sarki*) not only reveals the prophets true loyalty, it points directly to the origin of the message. Authenticity has to be shown in a genuine revelation of spiritual grounding, for whoever "does *not* confess Jesus is not of God." Leaving the source of the prophetic message undisclosed equally gives away its lack of genuineness, making the speaker a representative of "the world" (*to kosmo*) which is juxtaposed to the Spirit of God. In this case, however, it is not a pitching of spirit against matter. Instead, the writer of 1 John asks for a confession of "Jesus Christ in the flesh" to draw the line against those of "the world" who wanted to divest him of his bodily humanity. Discernment of spirits in this context functioned as an act of gatekeeping towards those who sought to become part of the community 1 John addresses,[248] but in the author's view should not be admitted for fear of diluting the truth.

'Discernment' as doctrinal gatekeeping

In the centuries to follow, Augustine wrote a series of ten homilies on 1 John reflecting on the criteria by which the believer could discern a heretic from one who had the right faith, qualifying her or him to belong to the Christian community.[249] It is interesting to note that Augustine did not believe that confessing, 'Jesus is Lord', on its own would suffice as criterion to authenticate the presence of the Spirit of God. Hence he places "charity" or acts of sacrificial love, alongside

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248   Craig G. Koester, 'John, Gospel of.' 723–725. David Rensberger, 'John, Letters of.' 725–726. In: David Noel Friedman, Allen C. Myers, Astrid B. Beck, (eds.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000.

249   Augustine. *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*. VI. 11–14. At http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf107.iv.ix.html Accessed 13/11/2010.

the confession that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh", believing that the absence of charitable acts would dismantle the heretics' confession as pure lip-service.[250]

I began this exploration of New Testament texts with the observation of Matthew's critique of the Pharisees' insistence on remaining within their own traditional ways of knowing and understanding God, thus depriving themselves of the privileged place in God's salvation history that was offered to them in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. In the paragraphs that follow, I will conclude this exploration by examining some of the texts that show how Jesus himself was engaging in the practice of discernment.

Jesus and the practice of discernment

One of the salient features of Jesus' life and ministry was his extraordinarily close relationship with God, whom Jesus affectionately called "Father". This relationship provided Jesus with a privileged position in that he had an acute, fresh and continuing sense of the content of his teaching, his ministry of healing, the need for confrontation, as well as an immediate sense of direction in relation to where his short public life was heading. Following his baptism and in preparation for his public life, led by the Spirit, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. Matthew's and Luke's accounts preface the purpose of this time as "to be tempted by the devil" (Mt. 4:1; Lk. 4:1). In a threefold challenge Jesus had to discern what was or was not in keeping with his identity and his ministry: the personified devil presents Jesus with the temptation to turn stones into bread at a time of great physical hunger; to give the devil power over him in exchange for receiving absolute worldly power; and to tempt God to rescue Jesus as he throws himself from the top of a mountain. Both Luke and Matthew frame Jesus' encounter with Satan as a spiritual battle in which the tempter seeks to deceive and seduce Jesus to abandon and abuse his relationship with the Father. Each time Jesus' discernment is unflinching and sharp, keeping him in the safe confines of that relationship, even though this is such an exhausting battle, that upon its conclusion it required the angels to serve Jesus (Mt. 4:11).

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250 Especially ibid., para. 14., 500.

On another occasion Jesus challenges the discernment of his disciples by posing the question of his identity to them, not long before he was to enter Jerusalem to face his accusers (Mk. 8:27–29; Mt. 16:13–20). Simon Peter offered the appropriate response, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." But after receiving Jesus' explanation of what would happen next, Peter demonstrated an utter lack of a proper understanding of Jesus' ministry. Instead, Peter tried to take control over Jesus' life and his impending suffering, only to be rebuked by Jesus in very similar terms to those Jesus used to reject the devil in the wilderness: "Get behind me, Satan." (Mt. 16:23) Taking the locus of control away from God and assuming power over Jesus signified a most serious error in discernment on Peter's part.

One of the most pivotal incidents of personal of discernment can be found in Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane (Mk. 14:32–42; Lk. 22:39–46; Mt. 26:36–56). The reader is presented with Jesus, the human being, who wrestles with his willingness to give himself over to those who wish to see him destroyed. Jesus' torment and desolation stand in stark contrast to the disciples who, paralysed by sleepiness, miss the opportunity to support their teacher. This is all the more surprising, as this is the only time that Jesus ever asked his disciples to fulfil a personal need. Mark gives the most dramatic depiction of Jesus' prayer. In the fashion of a lament Jesus pleads, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet not what I want but what you want." (Mk. 14:36) Three times Jesus took his plea to the Father. Each time he asks that the cup should pass, followed by his yielding to the inevitable. Luke adds the detail of sweat turning into blood, followed by an angel serving Jesus (Lk. 22:43–44). These passages qualify as instances of discernment because Jesus finds himself at a crossroads in his willingness to follow the path laid out for him. But instead of ignoring his struggle or overcoming it in a stoic manner in silence, he enters into it in its fullness, processing the inner crisis of obedience at the only place where it could be adequately addressed, his relationship with God. The heavens did not open, God did not affirm his love for Jesus to strengthen him. But after presenting his bid three times in the dark of night, Jesus emerges resolved. His struggle for internal alignment with the Father's will came to a place of acceptance and an embrace of the inevitable. His wrestling did not centre around finding the way forward. The way forward was clear. It focused on the question whether there was an alternative to the way forward and the answer was 'no'.

Pulling together the threads

The survey of a number of selected passages from the scriptures has resulted in a rich and varied picture of communal and personal discernment. The Hebrew scriptures address the question of true or false prophecy in the context of God's demand for an exclusive relationship with Israel. The integrity of word and action is a hallmark of true prophecy. God expects undivided attention and worship that is only directed towards God. The authenticity of the prophet's message was often not immediately recognisable, but it could be verified with the wisdom of hindsight.

Reading the account of the disciples' inquiry into Jesus' role in history in Luke's account of the Acts revealed a view of discernment that privileged 'being sent as witnesses to the ends of the world' over a 'knowing of God's plan' for humanity, supported by the promise of the advent of the Spirit (Acts 1:6–8). In pivotal decisions in the life of the early church, discernment was nurtured by prayerfully listening to the great narratives of faith, by reinterpreting the scriptures in light of new needs for culturally diverse emerging Christian communities, by sensitively listening to one another and to the Spirit's promptings. As the early Christian communities gathered to make decisions they brought their only recently formed passionately held beliefs to the process. Their expression of faith assumed a new shape, extending to strange worlds and foreign others, yet upholding the bonds of fellowship in Christ, forged through the active missionary work of the Spirit in and through the first missionaries. The expansion of faith took place at the cost of previously prized religious-cultural practices. But it also facilitated a diversification and simplification of expressions of faith that inevitably redefined the centre of faith and the rules around its practice. Discernment in this context meant to be open to the unknown, trusting that the Spirit would steer the course for the sake of the good news of Jesus Christ and continuously working on establishing unity through collaboration among the fledgling Christian communities.

There was more going on than a re-writing of cultural rules in the early Church's decision making. Paul's admonishment of the Corinthians' behaviour around the table of the Lord's Supper brings in a new ethos of relating that is directly rooted in Christ's living relationship

with his Church. Discerning the body and blood of Christ can only be regarded as a sincere spiritual practice when the radically equalising impulse of being Christ's follower is embodied in new relational practices. This involved a qualitative leap from socially to spiritually defined relationships. Thus, discerning Christ's body and blood entailed truly becoming a body with different functions but of equal status. The only way Christ can be seen to be alive and present in his church is through the way members live and work together, as one body and many members. Whilst in the Lukan writings discernment largely took place as part of the early church's decision making, in Pauline writings discernment is embedded into a new ethos of discipleship, grounded in Christ's own transforming *agape* love. Knowing and remembering who he was and what his life, death and resurrection meant for each person and for the community as a whole marked the beginning of the thriving of a new relational equality. Exercising discernment that was grounded in remembering, gave the community spiritual direction in terms of the way they needed to honour each person as Christ's dwelling place and together as his body.

In his letter to the Roman church Paul adds a further dimension for the spiritual practice of discernment as the communal embodiment of Christ's love, namely the whole life as worship while remaining distinct from the world so as to be able to definitively discern God's will. There is an abiding sense of urgency in this passage in terms of the totality of faithful living to which each member of the Christian community in Rome is called. Whilst the texts of 1 Corinthians breathe a sense of doing theology for the sake of conflict resolution and the avoidance of schism, the Roman verses point to a loving unity of the communal Christian life that is relevant whether there is conflict or not. The summary of how to love one another, although poetically less powerful when compared to 1 Corinthians 13, sums up succinctly once more what the Christian life, the ever discerning life, is all about: treating one another and one's enemies with exquisite care, solicitous attention to strangers and generous hospitality. In the whole of chapter 12 Paul passionately and concisely outlines the very divine will he calls the Romans to discern and to commit to. Hence, discernment in this context does not merely entail a venturing into God's unknown will, but a call to embrace more deeply what is already revealed.

The Johannine text on "discerning the spirits" refers to discernment as a form of gatekeeping in relation to the integrity of the faith which relied as much on Christ's spiritual identity as on his bodily humanity. It is interesting to note that Augustine did not believe that making a confession was in and of itself enough to prove an authentic faith. He discerned that charitable actions had to authenticate the confession. Only then did it carry credibility.

Discernment as part of Jesus' life, in the wilderness, kept him safely connected to God. The gospels' account of the temptation show Jesus with unambiguous clarity in terms of what is acceptable and unacceptable in his relationship with God. His attempt to teach Peter to be discerning ended in an abrupt rejection of Peter's attempt to take over the direction of Jesus' life. The contrast between Jesus' full knowledge of the future and Peter's ignorant reaction to it could not have been starker. Discernment, that is being fully aware of the nature and meaning of Jesus' identity and ministry only came to Peter after Pentecost. Jesus' agonising personal struggle for discernment in Gethsemane showed yet another facet of discernment in the form of a lament. The cathartic externalisation of his inner struggle and desolation brought into conversation with God, ultimately took him to a place of surrender and acceptance. In this context discernment as process of struggle and as outcome have taken shape.

The discoveries of this chapter have helped to clarify that discernment is a gift that is profoundly rooted in the relationship between God and God's people. After Pentecost each believer is qualified to exercise discernment. Contexts may have varied but faithful inquiry that might lead to a new interpretation of the tradition helps in stepping out into the unknown with trust in the Spirit's presence.

Chapter 5. Spiritual discernment in the Desert Tradition

In the following two chapters I will explore the discernment practices which were part of the tradition of the so called 'desert spirituality.' The desire to withdraw from the business of village or town life for the sake of seeking union with God produced abiding practices of discernment which are to this day revisited by those interested in the process of spiritual direction. Spiritual direction represented a lifeline for a desert father or mother because it helped to avoid some of the pitfalls of solitary spiritual practice. Silence, self-examination, living deprived of the most basic comforts, prayerful reading of the scriptures and receiving advice from an experienced guide, these were some of the activities that filled the days and nights of the desert dwellers. In this brief chapter, I will examine some of the core elements in relation to discernment. In the next chapter I will explore the work of St Ignatius who drew most diligently from the writings of the desert dwellers and whose influence on the practice of spiritual direction for today is ever present.

Traditionally, spiritual discernment has been practised in the context of the one-to-one relationship between a spiritual director or a pastoral accompanist and a person seeking to discern God's will or the Spirit's guidance for her or his life. The ministry of spiritual direction emerged from a series of historical developments which will be briefly touched on below. Desert spirituality, Carmelite, Benedictine and Cistercian rules, their ensuing monastic communities, and the Ignatian Exercises and evolving counselling practises around the practice of the auricular confession contributed to this ministry which is widely practiced today.

English Jesuit David Lonsdale[251] offers a helpful framework as he suggests a shift in focus in relation to the practice of discernment. Up until Vatican II Roman Catholicism taught that the aim of spiritual practices was to reach perfection. Lonsdale reports that individuals, whether married or single, lay, religious or ordained were to strive for perfection, an ideal embedded into the being of each person by the Creator. Perfection was realised "by use of the means the church

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251   David Lonsdale, *Dance to the music of the Spirit. The Art of Discernment.* London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992, 14–15.

offered: prayer, penance, asceticism, the sacramental life, obedience to the moral law and the rules of church membership, cultivation of the virtues proper to one's position in the church".[252] Perfection at the most fundamental level meant the abandonment of individuality, a quasi depersonalisation, through compliance with a system of spiritual conformity. However, after Vatican II he observes a notable move away from the attainment of perfection towards a retrieval of the uniqueness of each person, a quasi re-personalisation. As part of this move, discernment involved "fostering Christian growth by giving attention to an individual's or a group's unique history, experience, aspirations, desires and feelings in relation to the 'signs of the times' and the gospel".[253] Both positions have their roots in traditions pivotal to the development of a discerning spirituality. Protestant ways of discernment which emerged in the centuries following the Reformation put their own stamp on the practice of discernment, both personal and corporate.

Discernment among desert dwellers

Desert life and desert spirituality are commonly known as the informal precursors of more formalised monastic life.[254] Spiritual seekers withdrew into the desert and after some time attracted a followership. From these spiritual 'cells' eventually larger communities grew and with the increase in numbers, the need for an ordered community emerged. When Christianity was first released from being a persecuted sect and for the first time Christians were free to practice their religion publicly, after Constantine's edict of religious toleration in 313, an immediate ascetic counter movement arose. However, long before the Constantine edict, men and women followed the call to renounce the comforts of the world and sought out the deprivation of desert life. The deserts of Egypt and Syria attracted the first wave of ascetics. What was the significance of the desert as a space for the spiritual life? Carmelite priest Ernest E. Larkin notes that in the desert setting

> Christian holiness was a kind of white martyrdom, a total giving over of one's life to God, the shedding of all self-indulgence in favor of a single-minded search for God. The desert was a graphic symbol of the emptiness of life and the otherness of God.

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252   David Lonsdale, *Dance to the music of the Spirit,* 15.

253   David Lonsdale, *Dance to the music of the Spirit,* 15.

254   See Philip Sheldrake, *A brief History of Spirituality.* Carlton, Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. See especially chapter 2.

> The emptiness translated into purity of heart, a heart freed from sinful affections and
>
> centered on God.[255]

The stark emptiness of the desert represented an external environment that profoundly impacted on the internal experience of the desert dwellers. Removed from the distractions and comforts of village or urban life, the desert dweller was able to concentrate on one thing and one thing only, first-hand knowledge of God. Colm Luibheid, in his preface to John Climacus' *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, explains the pervasive belief of the ancient desert dwellers as follows: "given the right conditions and preparation, a man [and woman] may even in this life work his passage upward into the actual presence of God; and there, if God so chooses, he can receive a direct and intimate knowledge of the Divine Being".[256] The promise of this kind of knowledge prompted desert dwellers to undergo all kinds of hardship to erase all captivity to their human selves. This included any comforts or dependencies they might experience in and through their bodies. Any spiritual practice performed in the fierce and sparse surroundings of the desert was put into the service of taking away those aspects of the self that prevented the Divine being from fully indwelling the human being, even if only for brief moments. John Climacus (550–606) integrated a wide body of knowledge assembled from desert dwellers' recorded spiritual experiences in his writing, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*.[257] The metaphor of the ladder serves as a structure that describes the spiritual journey in a systematic, step-by-step process. In the final step, step thirty, headed "On Faith, Hope, and Love", Climacus hints at some of the fleeting moments of fulfilment of the spiritual journey in the following way:

> Hope is an abundance of hidden treasure. It is an abundant assurance of the riches in
>
> store for us. It is a rest from labor, a doorway of love. … Love grants prophecy, miracles.
>
> It is an abyss of illumination, a fountain of fire, bubbling up to inflame the thirst soul.[258]

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255 Ernest E. Larkin 'Desert Spirituality'. 364–476. In: *Review for Religious*, Volume 61, Number 4 (July/August, 2002), 470. At http://carmelnet.org/larkin/larkin024.pdf Accessed 10/09/2010.

256 John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent. The Classics Of Western Spirituality*. Translation by Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell. Notes on Translation by Norman Russell. Introduction by Kalistos Ware. Preface by Colm Luibheid. New York, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1982, xvii.

257 Ibid.

258 Ibid., 289.

He then continues to talk about love by addressing it in the second person:

> Most beautiful of all virtues, tell us where you feed your flock, where you take your noonday rest (cf. Song of Songs 1:7). Enlighten us, end our thirst, lead us, show us the way, since we long to soar up to you. You rule everything, and now you have enraptured my soul. I am unable to hold in your flame, and therefore I will go forward, praising you.[259]

Climacus' words vacillate between yearning for God, finding fulfilment in God and worship of God as he attempts to convey the subtle touching and recoiling of the human soul from the overwhelming presence of Divine love. These almost unspeakable moments were the goals desert dwellers were hoping to attain.

Discernment as learning a relationship

In the process of acquiring such exquisite divine knowledge seekers or students committed themselves to spiritual disciplines which required the close supervision of experienced elders. Here, in desert fathers and mothers offering of spiritual guidance to those who had chosen desert life for the promise of becoming more God-filled, the origins of the ministry of spiritual direction can be found. Philip Sheldrake characterises the role of these spiritual guides as follows:

> In the hermit or *skete* ways of life, reliance on the spiritual father or mother was vital for practical advice on how to survive the rigors of desert life, on how to avoid illusions, and on how to become wise in the ways of the heart … The spiritual guides were chosen because of their wisdom and experience – hence they are often called "an old man (or woman)." The purpose of guidance was simply to open the pupil's heart to be taught by God … At the heart of the relationship was obedience. This was both a discipline – a correction of any tendency to rely on one's own powers – and an expression of receptivity to God.[260]

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259 Ibid., 289.

260 Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality*, 47, 48.

Sheldrake suggests that obedience, humility, charity and discernment were virtues at the heart of the teachings of the desert fathers and mothers. Among the ascetic virtues discernment was most highly prized because

> [i]n the mind of desert ascetics, discernment was often associated with the ability to recognize the difference between the inspiration of God and the illusionary promptings of the demons. Discernment was a gift of God received through deep prayer and ascetic practice.[261]

In his *24 Conferences* John Cassian (died 432 or 435) wrote the first systematic rule of monastic life from his experience in the Egyptian desert. The purpose of a monk's life was twofold: in the long term it was about obtaining the Kingdom of Heaven. The short term goal that would be most acutely helpful in accomplishing the long term was purity of heart.[262] Cassian's *Conferences* are composed of conversations about spiritual matters with elders of the desert life, such as Abbot Moses, Abbot Paphnutius, Abbot Daniel, Abbot Serapius and so on. In *Conference II*, chapters I, II, IX and X, Cassian outlines the nature of "discretion" or discernment through the expositions of Abbot Moses. It is regarded as a gift of the Spirit, based on Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. "[I]t is no earthly thing and no slight matter, but the greatest prize of divine grace", as Abbot Moses states at the conclusion of chapter I. Discernment manifests as the ability to avoid the traps which could lead the monk astray and deter him from reaching the summit of perfection. Discretion functions as a sharp spiritual awareness that helps the monk to remain on the "Royal Road", the middle path of moderation (chapter I and II). It is accomplished through the practice of humility, which in the context of seeking perfection means to abandon all self confidence and entrust one's life and thoughts completely into the care of a spiritually more advanced elder (chapter X). Athanasius, in his famous biography of the life of Anthony, quotes him saying,

> much prayer and asceticism is needed so that one who receives through the Spirit the gift of discrimination of spirits might be able to recognize their traits—for example,

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261 Ibid., 48–49.

262 *The Conferences of John Cassian.* Translation and Notes by Edgar C. Gibson. At http://www.osb.org/lectio/cassian/conf/index.html
See also *Conference I*, chapter IV, http://www.osb.org/lectio/cassian/conf/book1/conf1.html#1.1 Both accessed 02/09/2010.

which of them are less wicked, and which of them are more; and in what kind of pursuit each of them exerts himself, and how each of them is overturned and expelled.[263]

Discernment as a daily discipline helped desert dwellers of any stature to navigate their paths around temptations, distractions and misdirection.

The already mentioned John Climacus built on Cassian's teachings in his book, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. The image of the Jacob's ladder which Climacus gave 30 rungs, helped him to map out the journey towards spiritual perfection.[264] But the thirty steps also symbolised, in a hidden manner, the thirty years of Christ's life. Thus Climacus believed that the spiritual seeker, by mastering his or her faults and virtues was imitating Christ. Preceded by step 25, entitled "Humility", Step 26 is headed, "On discernment of thoughts, passions and virtues", beginning with the following developmental sequence:

> Among beginners, discernment is real self-knowledge; among those midway along the road to perfection, it is a spiritual capacity to distinguish unfailingly between what is truly good and what in nature is opposed to the good; among the perfect, it is a knowledge resulting from divine illumination, which with its lamp can light up what is dark in others.[265]

There is a gradual expansion of the spheres of discerning, beginning with self, extending to a clear, "unfailing" moral knowing, culminating in knowing what is hidden or "dark in others". After setting the context with these three stages, Climacus defines discernment simply as "solid understanding of the will of God in all times, in all places, in all things", and as "an uncorrupted conscience. It is pure perception".[266] The supreme spiritual power of acquiring discernment lies in its ability to free the aspirant from bondage to sin, or from the "three" and "five", Climacus' shorthand for Evagrius' list of the three principal evil thoughts of gluttony, vainglory and avarice

263 Athanasius, *Athanasius—The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*. Translated with introduction by Robert C. Gregg, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980, 47–48. Quoted in Prechtel, *To Have the Mind of Christ*, 18.

264 Norman Russell. 'Climacus, St. John.' 89. In: Gordon S. Wakefield, (ed.), *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. London: SCM Press, 1983, 89.

265 John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 229. On page 55 I have quoted from Step 30 which reveals the illuminating lamp as love.

266 Ibid., 229.

giving rise to the five faults of lust, despondency, pride, dejection and anger.[267] Those who embark on the journey of acquiring perfect discernment begin by "mortifying their own will", followed by submitting "humbly and in confidence to the fathers or even the brothers and they should accept their counsel, as though from God Himself"[268]. By abandoning all judgement about the capacities of others and by unconditionally and through indiscriminate surrendering to their advice and judgement, the seeker's pride is annihilated and progress is made toward that "pure perception" of God's will in all times and places. Such progress was the hallmark of discernment.

Remembering death

At the heart of desert spirituality lies "the remembrance of death, which puts earthly concerns into their correct perspective".[269] Dying to the needs of the human self and dying to the needs of the body were pivotal acts of preparation towards receiving the presence of God within. Overcoming earthly passions led to becoming "impassionate", not as an end in itself but as precondition for "a total openness to love without any impediments by the human self."[270] God himself was believed to be the source of such self-emptying love. The kind of knowledge of God sought by the desert dwellers through a life of simplicity, renunciation and continuing spiritual practice was revelatory and embodied divine knowledge, the kind of knowledge that required thoroughgoing discernment.

It is interesting to note that none of the authors who write about desert spirituality treated discernment as a skill or a technique that could be acquired through the repeated practise of certain elements. Rather, it is confirmed as a spiritual gift and necessary tool for the spiritual journey, transmitted in interaction with a spiritual guide, an elder, wiser, more experienced desert dweller. If one of the core aims of spiritual direction was to teach discernment to a disciple, then the disciple had, above all, to learn how to receive guidance from her or his

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267   See Colm Luibheid's footnote 94 on page 229.
268   John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 244.
269   Norman Russell, 'Climacus, St. John', 89.
270   Ibid., 89.

spiritual guide.[271] Making the most of this kind of guidance was like "learning a relationship". It required mistrusting their own perceptions, blurred by pride and the tendency to deceive themselves; getting to know their inner life and being able to absolutely entrust themselves to their spiritual guides for the sake of the relationship with God – these were the key elements on the path towards acquiring the kind of discernment that would open the way to revelatory divine knowledge.

Discernment and early forms of spiritual direction

As the Roman Catholic tradition evolved, early informal spiritual guidance developed into a more formal type of spiritual direction that grew into a long standing and highly cultivated form of spiritual guidance within the monastic context. It unfolded in the early spiritual communities[272] primarily exercised in the relationship between the monk and his Abbott, or in later centuries, between the nun and her Abbess. One such example can be found in chapter 3 of the Rule of St Benedict where a description is given of a public exercise in discernment between the Abbot and the monks:

> As often as anything important is to be done in the monastery, the abbot shall call the whole community together and himself explain what the business is; and after hearing the advice of the brothers, let him ponder it and follow what he judges the wiser course. The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger. The brothers, for their part, are to express their opinions with all humility, and not presume to defend their own views obstinately. The decision is rather the abbot's to make, so that when he has determined what is more prudent, all may obey. Nevertheless, just as it is proper for disciples to

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271 Marko Ivan Rupnik, *Discernment. Acquiring the Heart of God.* Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006, 32. Rupnik believes that discernment can only be learned in a relationship with a spiritual guide. In this he follows the tradition of spiritual guidance emulated in the monastic traditions.

272 See Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend. Spiritual Direction in the Modern World.* New revised Edition. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994, 183.

obey their master, so it is becoming for the master on his part to settle everything with foresight and fairness.[273]

The text de facto depicts a communal deliberation of sorts within the monastic context, in which the voices of younger brothers are heard and considered. Although arguing and defensiveness are discouraged, a humble stating of one's view is desirable, "since the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger". The Abbot is cast in the role of moderator in the process of 'hearing' but also as the one who will make the final decision. In this monastic scenario we find an example of communal deliberation and discernment of God's leading preceding a decision. From repeated pastoral conversations related to the spiritual lives of monks and nuns it grew into a highly differentiated pastoral craft which kept the heart of a monastic community alive in faithful practice. Thus shaped, it flourished as part of a supervised practice of prayer and spiritual growth in an environment governed by a strict rule which facilitated ascetic living and left space for mystic experiences.[274] Over time spiritual direction found its way into the lives of the laity in both Roman and Protestant churches and expanded from a one-on-one interaction, pre or post confessional counselling, to a communal event.

In desert spirituality discernment was valued as the ability to follow an inner compass that pointed out the most direct way towards an experience of union with God. Stripping away all distractions and comforts, the desert dwellers came face to face with themselves. Not getting lost in the maze of human foibles and desires required a highly developed ability for self examination and in addition, sometimes, also the help of a more experienced guide. Learning to trust an elder could also involve the elder taking on the discerning function. But in the final analysis, each desert dweller carved out her or his own path to the desired experience of union.

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273 St. Benedict of Nursia, *RB, 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed. Timothy Fry, O.S.B. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1981, RB 3. 1–6 Quoted in Daniel Prechtel, *To have the Mind of Christ: Symbol, Guidance and the Development of Christ. Communal Spiritual Discernment Processes for Parish Life, Mission and Ministry*. A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry (Anglican Ministries), 2002, 19. At http://llministries.homestead.com/files/To_Have_the_Mind_of_Christ.pdf Accessed 11/09/2010.

274 See *Note on 'Spirituality'*. In: Cheslyn P. Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold, (eds.), *The Study of Spirituality*. London: SPCK, 1986, xxv. The authors claim that ascetic theology deals with those teachings that describe what human beings can do to prepare for an encounter with God by way of purification of mind, body and spirit, whereas mystical theology reflects on what God does to reveal Godself to human beings. In: Robin Maas, Gabriel O'Donnell, 'An Introduction to Spiritual Theology: The Theory That Undergirds Our Practice.' 11–21. In: Robin Maas and Gabriel O'Donnell, (eds.), *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1990, 16.

The following chapter will pursue the threads of the origins of discernment and spiritual direction further and see them unfold and flourish in the work of Ignatius.

Chapter 6. Personal and communal discernment in the Ignatian Tradition

In this chapter I will explore personal and communal discernment as they are practiced in the Ignatian tradition. Ignatius' influence permeates contemporary discernment practices as I have pointed out in various places. His notion of 'discernment of spirits' is of special importance in terms of understanding the depth of self examination into which Ignatius calls those who wish to practice discernment.

Ignatius of Loyola and spiritual discernment in the Exercises

The synthesising of ancient sources with material from his own time[275] into a systematic description of spiritual discernment, its rules, conditions, criteria, pitfalls and outcomes, must be credited to Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556). Ignatius' influence is notable in numerous contemporary writings on discernment across the Roman Catholic and Protestant spectrum whether they directly relate to his Exercises or not.[276] The use of typical Ignatian vocabulary, such as "discernment of spirits", "consolation" and "desolation" indicates some grounding in this tradition. The classical Ignatian terms surface so widely and so frequently that they can almost be treated as part of a common vernacular of a worldwide practice of spiritual discernment. Among Ignatius' writings his *Spiritual Exercises* have offered a set of rules and steps to equip a person over time and under guidance, to increase their self awareness and spiritual perception. The

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275 See for example Ewert H. Cousin's essay 'Franciscan Roots of Ignatian Meditation.' 51–63. In: George Peter Schner, (ed.), *Ignatian Spirituality in a Secular Age.* Papers presented at a symposium, organised by Regis College, 20–21 March 1981. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1984. Cousin shows the influence of Buenaventure's *Tree of Life* and *Soul's journey into God,* as well as Bernhard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs,* writings that are connected by their interest in devotion to the humanity of Christ. Francis used some of Buenaventure's material to craft a meditation on the imitation of Christ which shows remarkable similarities with the text of Ignatius' *Exercises.* Ignatius not only shared his predecessors' interest in the devotion to Christ's humanity but also drew extensively from the way in which they had developed it into spiritual practices, especially in the contemplation on the suffering and resurrection of Christ in the *Exercises.* 54–56 and 61–63.

276 See a small sample of examples: Canadian Methodist Gordon T. Smith, *Listening to God In Times Of Choice. The Art of Discernment.* Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1997, chapter 4; Roman Catholic lay woman Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Finding God in All Things. Praying with St. Ignatius.* Glasgow: Collins, Fount Paperbacks, 1987; Jesuit priest Pierre Wolff, *Discernment. The Art of Choosing Well.* Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph, 2003; German Jesuit priest Stefan Kiechle, *The Art of Discernment. Making Good Decisions in your World of Choices.* Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 2005; English Jesuit priest David Lonsdale, *Dance to the Music of the Spirit. The Art of Discernment.* London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992; Anglican Debra K. Farrington, *Hearing With The Heart. A Gentle Guide for Discerning God's Will for Your Life.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass. A Wiley Imprint, 2003.

guided process of spiritual growth is meant to enable a person to exercise the gift of discernment in relation to any aspect of their life.[277]

Discernment of Spirits

"Discernment of Spirits" in the Ignatian tradition relates to a rather complex process of tracing the origins and the direction of internal movements, cognitive and affective in content.[278] Before a person is capable of accurately "reading" their own internal movements in terms of being of "evil" or of "good" origin, moving a person either closer to God (consolation) or alienating a person further from God (desolation), they firstly need to anchor themselves in a close relationship with Christ. Hence, the first of four weeks of the Ignatian *Exercises* are spent in establishing and deepening a person's relationship with God through meditating on the passion of Christ. From the basis of such a newly confirmed bond, the process of learning discernment can take its course.[279]

Engaging in the *Exercises* has a significant formational influence on three areas: self-knowledge, ways of praying and making choices.[280] Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean describe the gist of a retreat as follows:

> The idea is to bring the retreatant gently into a state where prayer before God can be undertaken while at the same time one looks honestly at the failings and drawbacks which hinder that prayer. Eventually the attention focuses more and more on the

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277 See Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings. Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters including the text of The Spiritual Exercises.* Translated with Introduction and Notes by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean. London: Penguin Books, 1996, 281–327.

278 See Dennis Edwards, *Breath of Life. A Theology of the Creator Spirit.* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004, chapter 11. Discernment of the Spirit. 158–159. In this chapter Edwards offers a brief overview of some of the core principles of Ignatius' *Exercises.* He outlines the various movements of the Spirits, e.g. specific internal movements, in relation to their origin and directionality in six statements, highlighting the role of self-reflection as a key tool for discernment, alongside discerning prayer. The sixth statement illustrates the nature of Ignatian discernment most clearly: "*6. When a person is being drawn toward God, interior movements that are of God will tend to be at one with this direction, while those that are evil will be disruptive. When a person is being drawn away from God, evil movements will tend to be at one with this direction, while those that are of God will be disruptive.*" 166. Edwards' summary demonstrates the levels of complexity and subtlety that may be involved in discerning what drives and hinders an internal movement towards God.

279 Ignatius devised two sets of rules that accompanied the full four week exercises. The first set consists of 14 rules, headed "Rules by which to perceive and understand to some extent the various movements produced by the soul: The good that they may be accepted and the bad that they may be rejected. (Rules more suitable for the first week)." The second set is made up of eight rules specifically designed for the second week, entitled "Rules for the same purpose containing more advanced ways of discerning the spirits. (Rules more applicable to the second week)." Both sets offer the spiritual director and the seeker interpretative guidelines to discern where an internal movement may originate and where it might want to lead. Saint Ignatius, *Personal Writings,* 348 and 351.

280 Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings. Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters including the text of The Spiritual Exercises.* Translated with Introduction and Notes by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean. London: Penguin Books, 1996, 282.

figure of Jesus Christ, and on his liberating message. It is in the light of the One who claimed to be the Way, the Truth and the Life that the exercitant examines whether the life he or she is leading is as it should be.[281]

The systematic and prayerful engagement with the person, life and teaching of Christ draws the seeker's attention more deeply towards him. But in moving into a closer relationship with Christ, a lens for self examination is sharpened and directed onto the seeker's own life. Contemplating Christ's love, healing, forgiveness and self sacrifice brings into focus the degree to which these qualities are present or absent. The increased closeness enables the rise of vulnerability and honesty in terms of personal weaknesses or even sinfulness. Allowing the ordinary defences to be lowered makes a fruitful discernment more likely.

Consolation and desolation

The significance of Ignatius' approach to discernment relates to the fact that he developed a process of connecting persons with Christ, as well as a methodology of carefully observing cognitive and affective movements for which he provided sets of interpretative rules. These rules enabled the practitioner to identify with relative certainty what "spirit" moved her/him and into which direction the "spirit" is leading.

The most salient aspect of Ignatius' *Exercises* lies in his address of "good" and "evil" spirits as potential guiding influences in the process of discernment. Evil spirits are associated with sin, good spirits with overcoming sin. In rules 314 and 315 Ignatius explains his understanding of both sets of spirits.[282] The person overcome by sin will be "harassed" by nudges of conscience and feelings of remorse to indicate that "the power of moral judgment" which is an instrument of the good spirits is at work. Conversely, the person on the path to progress and purification from sin will be disturbed by "the bad spirit to harass, sadden and obstruct".[283] Thus the effect of good spirits is not simply a pleasant feeling, nor is the effect of bad spirits automatically a negative

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281 Ibid., 282.
282 Ibid., 348.
283 Ibid., 348.

state of being. In these rules Ignatius reveals an understanding of discernment that recognises forces with the power to obstruct a person from finding clarity in the will of God. The interior movement that may lead to a soul becoming "inflamed with the love of her Creator and Lord", as rule 316 characterises "consolation" may be hindered by darkness, disturbance, anxiety, "lack of confidence in which the soul is without hope and without love" as rule 317 describes the power of "desolation".[284] Desolation calls for confession whereas consolation invites expressions of gratitude and praise. Whilst for Ignatius, the evil spirits were personified in the devil or "the enemy", a modern interpretation uses a psychological understanding of destructive drives, urges and motives hidden in a person's subconscious. Catholic theologian Dennis Edwards puts it like this: "[w]e have learned that we are not neutral interpreters of reality, but inclined, often unconsciously, towards what serves our own interest and maintains our own privilege".[285]

John C. Futrell in his essay on 'Ignatian discernment', suggests that "there is no more central theme in Ignatian spirituality or, for that matter, in Christian spirituality itself than that of discernment", because discernment is understood as a "conception, which involves choosing the way of the light of Christ instead of the way of the darkness of the Evil One and living out the consequences of this choice through discerning what specific decisions and actions are demanded to follow Christ here and now".[286] The high view with which Futrell approaches discernment almost elevates it to a decisive factor in relation to a person's salvation. At any rate, discernment involves the confrontation with absolute choices between good and evil. Further below Futrell ties discernment more closely to the theme of vocation and qualifies it as "the choice of authentic Christian response to the word of God in each concrete situation in life".[287] The latter wording suggests the context of God's call to faithful living in the circumstances of everyday life.

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284 Ibid., 349.

285 Dennis Edwards, *Breath of Life*, 158.

286 John C. Futrell, 'Ignatian Discernment'. In: *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits.* 2/2 (April 1970), 47. Quoted in Joseph Lienhard, '*On "Discernment of Spirits"*', 505.

287 Ibid., 505.

Communal Discernment in the Ignatian Tradition

During the years of 1539 and 1540 Ignatius and a small group of his followers undertook a process of deliberation in relation to the question of formalising or institutionalising their informal, even if highly committed, spiritual community. The process is known as the *Deliberation of the First Fathers from 1539*.[288] The founding deliberations, whilst differing significantly from the contemporary process of communal discernment by the Jesuits,[289] nevertheless gave important impulses to the current communal discernment practices of the Jesuits. Margaret Hebblethwaite provides a succinct summary[290] of what occurred in the events of 1539. The deliberations ignited over the question as to whether a vow of obedience to one of their own, namely Ignatius, should be made. The vows of chastity and poverty had already been jointly taken at Montmartre in 1534. Hebblethwaite continues:

> The first question they put to themselves was whether or not to remain united in one body … This was easily agreed … Next they had to decide what sort of body they should be and this focused down to the precise question of whether they should take a vow of obedience. It was much harder to arrive at a common decision on this point. They prayed more persistently for guidance, and during the day they kept silence to allow for greater space for discernment of spirits in their personal prayer. Then on the evening of the first day, each one gave the reasons against the vow of obedience, which he had found through his own prayer and reflection. After the next day's silent prayer, each gave his reasons in favour of it.[291]

This shortened account contains the crucial elements of what later emerged as a corporate process of discernment amongst the Jesuits, especially in relation to filling the position of the head or the "general" of the society: a previous knowledge of the process of discerning the spirits, a clear question for deliberation, taking time for hearing and weighing the pros and an

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288 See Jules J. Toner, 'The Deliberation That Started the Jesuits: A Commentary on the Deliberatio primorum Patrum: Newly translated with an Historical Introduction. In: *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits* 6/4 (June 1974).

289 See also Futrell, 'Ignatian Discernment', and 'Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience'. In: *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits* 4/5 (November 1972), as well as a second essay by Jules J. Toner, 'A Method of Communal Discernment of God's Will'. In: *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits* 3/4 (September 1971); and the essay by Ladislas Orsy. 'Toward a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment.' In: *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits* 6/4 (June 1974).

290 Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Finding God in All Things. Praying with St. Ignatius.* Glasgow: Collins, Fount Paperbacks, 1987, 215–216.

291 Ibid., 216.

equal amount of time for naming and considering the cons. All pondering is embedded in the discipline of silent prayer through which the will of God is sought. The vocational dimension seen in personal discernment is now extended to the whole community. As Jules Toner put it, communal discernment is "a process undertaken by a community as a community for the purpose of judging what God is calling that community to do".[292]

Although this is a contemporary system that is procedurally far more elaborate, current elements can be traced back to the simple original building blocks above. Corporate discernment is an extension of and builds upon personal discernment. Jesuit Pierre Wolff confirms "the absolute necessity of a personal capacity for individual discernment for each one of us when we are members of a group that needs to reach a common decision".[293]

Futrell opens up the complexities of contemporary corporate discernment for the life of the *Societas Jesu* by stating that only "persons who have a faith-view of all reality, the view of biblical man"[294] can expect to engage effectively in the praxis of communal discernment. Futrell's use of Scripture as authorising such practice is literal. He identifies the reality of the scriptures with the presence without any hermeneutic mediation between the horizons. He quotes extensively from 1 John to claim "the Spirit within us as the source of our discernment".[295] Hence the goal of spiritual discernment is

> to become conscious of the Holy Spirit bearing witness within us that we have recognized the actual word of God spoken to us here and now in the event.[296]

Corporate discernment is utterly dependent on the authenticity and spiritual integrity of the individual participants' discernment. Communal discernment moves through the same stages "of prayer, gathering the evidence, and confirmation"[297] as individual discernment does; however

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292 Toner, 'A Method for Communal Discernment of God's Will', 124–25.

293 Pierre Wolff. *Discernment. The Art of Choosing Well. Based on Ignatian Spirituality.* Revised Edition. Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/ Triumph, 2003, 103.

294 Futrell's male dominated language is clearly inappropriate for today. Instead of "the view of biblical man" the expression "a biblical view" would be used. John Carroll Futrell, 'Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience'. In: *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits* 4/5 (November 1972), 160.

295 Futrell quotes Numbers 11:24–29, Deut. 30:11–14 and above all 1 John, especially 2:20, 2:27, 5:6 and 5:9–10. Futrell reminds the reader of the fact that Augustine wrote his theological legacy on discernment in *The Ten Homilies on the first Epistle of John*. At: http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf107.iv.iii.html Accessed 09/10/2010.

296 Futrell, 'Communal Discernment', 161–162.

297 Ibid., 162, 163 and 164.

the community has to arrive at a shared, communal witness of the Holy Spirit and therein lies its challenge. Futrell grounds the discerning community in the "ongoing core or primordial experience of God".[298] The communion of the discerning members in "the Spirit of the Risen Jesus is the core touchstone … through it an actual word of God to the community [can be] discerned as spoken through concrete events here and now".[299] The discerning community that is gathered by the Spirit into the presence of Christ can become so attuned to God and to one another that ordinary events may appear as divine revelations. The unshakable confidence in the community's capacity to discern because it is grounded in the Spirit of Christ is remarkable. One inevitably follows the other. Such bold conclusion only makes sense if each participant has indeed undergone the arduous sequence of the *Exercises* for themselves and continues to engage in the ongoing elements of prayer and examen.[300]

As the community exercises discernment participants are further grounded in "the specific charism originated in their founder or founders by the Holy Spirit and given to each of them." The Holy Spirit which brought the founders into a communion with Christ and with one another is equally at work at the heart of the discerning work of a contemporary community. The aim of arriving at a place of unity, however, so Futrell recognises, is made difficult due to the fact that "the Holy Spirit acts differently in each unique person". Because of this difficulty, the goal of the discernment process is "to discover a <u>new</u> presence of the Holy Spirit through the different manifestations of his action in each individual member of the community". This requires

> a <u>new</u> conversion of the individual members and the whole community, a <u>new</u> purification of motives, a <u>new</u> openness to even the unexpected and disconcerting word of the Father, a <u>new</u> gifted strength to say "Yes," which comes through the process of listening to the Holy Spirit speaking through one another.[301]

The discipline of "listening to the Holy Spirit" is the key practice in achieving the kind of renewal or conversion Futrell is stipulating as the core requirement for arriving at a unified solution. It is a kind of prayerful openness which differs from the everyday listening and speaking through the

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298   Ibid., 163.

299   Ibid., 163.

300   The prayer of examen concerns the discernment of spirits as described above.

301   Ibid., 164. Underlining is part of the original.

absence of arguments. Such listening is in fact a form of contemplation much like the solitudinal listening to the voice of the Spirit in personal prayer. Futrell describes it as

> simply <u>listening</u> to each person as he simply shares with his companions the movements of the Holy Spirit … During this time there is no effort to discuss or to argue, or, even, immediately to discern the decision. Each and all simply try to listen to this new evidence – to listen with the same openness as in prayer … After listening to the results of the individual discernment of each person, the effort is made to bring together what each one has heard from the Holy Spirit and, finally, communally to discern what is the actual word of God here and now to the whole community.[302]

Times of prayerful silence and prayerful listening are interspersed with prayerfully weighing the pros and cons of each option at hand, with deliberations as to the taking up or giving up of options and the checking of consensus. There are three essential prerequisites a discerning community needs that arise in light of its grounding in the Spirit of Christ and the charism of the founders. The first consists in being a communion in the sense of all members having "a consciously shared experience of profound union".[303] The second refers to open and real communication among all members. Honest dialogue is necessary if not vital in the process of discerning a common solution. The third is the "common commitment to carrying out the decisions reached through communal discernment" and "to execute it no matter what the cost, individually and corporately".[304] For this last prerequisite, Ignatius' notion of "holy indifference" is crucial. Ignatius introduced it with a view to fulfil a dual purpose: firstly, to ensure the freedom from human attachments and needs and secondly, to include the freedom to be open to whatever God is asking, i.e. the freedom to be obedient. To adopt a posture of holy indifference is the most important factor in arriving at a communally discerned decision.[305] Canadian Jesuit John English provides further insight into the meaning of freedom in communal discernment by positing that "[f]ree consensus of both free minds and free hearts is the only atmosphere in

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302 Ibid., 164. Underlining is part of the original.

303 Ibid., 168.

304 Ibid., 168–169.

305 Ibid., 178–179.

which communal discernment can take place".[306] For English, however, this freedom is not so much freedom from individual human needs and desires or lack of obedience, but freedom from oppression and systemic injustice. Holy indifference in this context means to be detached from the societal comforts which maintain individual consolation without benefiting the consolation of the oppressed and marginalised.

Communal discernment as part of the Jesuits' self rule has experienced a revival in recent decades. A record of this development is found in William Barry's account of the Jesuits' General Conference 32 in 1992 where we see a renewed commitment to communal discernment. Barry describes what happened as follows:

> GC 32 made an effort to encourage communities to become "communities of discernment." He quotes from the conference's document: "Clearly, the requisite dispositions for true communitarian discernment are such that they will not be verified as often as those for ordinary community dialogue. Nevertheless, every community should seek to acquire them, so that when need arises it can enter into this special way of seeking the will of God".[307]

Without going into further detail about the intricacies of the communal discernment process in the Ignatian tradition we have established that individual and communal discernment follow the same principles. At the heart of both types of discernment lies the notion of being grounded in communion of the person or community with the Spirit of the resurrected Christ or the person and work of Jesus Christ. Ideally, the closer to God a person or community as a whole is, the more likely is the possibility of genuinely discerned outcomes. The practice of prayer and prayerful listening is the most important practical vehicle for the concrete discernment of the movement of the Spirit within and among participants. As a person or the members of a community exercise the attitude of holy indifference the freedom to identify an authentic word or leading from God through the Spirit is enhanced.

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306 John English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community. An Ignatian View of the Small Faith Community*. London: Darton, Longmann and Todd, 1992, 132–134.

307 Barry quotes from Decree 11, "The Union of Minds and Hearts," of the thirty-second General Congregation, para. 23. In: *Documents of the Thirty-first and Thirty-second General Congregations of the Society of Jesus*. St. Louis, Mo.: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977, 475. In: William A. Barry, *Letting God Come Close. An Approach to the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 1994 and 2001, 159 and 201.

From these observations it is clear that the state of relating between persons, each person's acceptance of the community as a whole, each person's relationship with God and the whole community's relationship with God are crucial factors in the process to reach a discerned outcome together. If relationships are considered as channels of communication, then good relationships are signified by open and undisturbed channels of communication, or by a significant measure of knowing and accepting of one another; whereas disrupted relationships are characterised by the opposite. From this notion, it follows that any obstacles on the path to communal discernment are to be found in the quality of openness and the measure of knowing and accepting that is real and present in the relationships of the participants and their relationship with God. I will reflect in more depth on this issue below in the section on obstacles to discernment.

Spiritual Direction today

Since the Reformation spiritual direction "has combined the hearing of confessions with spiritual counsel".[308] Spiritual direction outside of the monastic life originated in the Catholic churches of France and Italy as part of their confessional practices, from where it gradually entered the spiritual lives and minds of English Protestants, lay and clergy.[309] Similar to the monks and nuns, a Christian lay person would practise paying attention to her or his inner life, searching for growth in awareness of the Spirit, sustenance through the discipline of a regular encounter with a spiritual director. Episcopal priest and spiritual director Margaret Guenther defines the role of the spiritual director in the twentieth century as "host", "teacher" and "midwife" in relation to the recipient's spiritual life.[310] But at its most fundamental level, "the spiritual director is simultaneously a learner and a teacher of discernment"[311] who exercises this gift and art through asking probing questions about the presence of God and the activity of the Spirit in the recipient's life. Gene Barrette's description teases out the triangular structure that is present in spiritual direction defining it in terms of

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308 N.W. Goodacre, 'Direction, Spiritual.' 114–115. In: Gordon S. Wakefield, (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. London: SCM Press, 1983, 115.

309 See Jones, Wainwright and Yarnold, *The Study of Spirituality*, xxiv and xxv.

310 Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening. The Art of Spiritual Direction.* London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992.

311 Ibid., 44.

the help or guidance that a person (directee) seeks and another (director) gives over a period of time in the process of growing in a loving relationship with God. This process unfolds under the continual impulse, inspiration, and action of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual direction, therefore, involves three persons: the directee, the director, and the Holy Spirit.[312]

At the heart of spiritual direction, Guenther believes, lies "a protracted discussion of the two great commandments … When all the layers have been stripped back, God is what the directee wants … but inextricably linked with love for all God's children".[313] Put in this way the relationship that comes to life as part of the ministry of spiritual guidance or spiritual direction is one in which spiritual growth is facilitated between the recipient and God. Spiritual direction grounded in the Ignatian tradition adopts a very structured view on the nature of spiritual experiences as Maureen Conroy exemplifies when she extracts three movements from Ignatius' initial conversion experience:

1. The Affective experience itself

2. Noticing, savouring and understanding the affective experience

3. The result of the Experience.[314]

Sequencing and structuring spiritual experiences, underpinned by a constant deepening of a person's relationship with God, are hallmarks of the Ignatian way. His systematic approach projects a clean sense of order and simplicity which, however, does not necessarily always line up with the messiness of life, of relationships and of the world of power and competition. To express his recognition of such potential gaps between theory and practice, Pierre Wolff heads one of his sections on communal discernment with the polemic line "Don't Be Naive, It's a Fight to the Finish". [315] Wolff highlights the difficulties with each person's unique relationship with God for the communal context and foreshadows obstacles and conflict. He furthermore adopts a critical attitude towards a unanimity which arises too early and asks,

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312   Gene Barrette, 'Spiritual Direction in the Roman Catholic Tradition.' *Journal of Psychology and Theology.* December 22, 2002. At http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-97908550/spiritual-direction-roman-catholic.html Accessed 04/09/2010.

313   Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening,* 25.

314   Maureen Conroy, *The Discerning Heart. Discovering a Personal God.* Chicago: Loyola Press, 1993, 7–9.

315   Wolff, *Discernment. The Art of Choosing Well,* 89.

What might we have overlooked? Have the members of the group been tired or lazy? Have we not felt free enough to express ourselves or have we been manipulated? Were we not well enough informed or were we too "obedient"?[316]

Canadian Jesuit and retreat facilitator John English (1924–2004), in *Spiritual Intimacy and Community. An Ignatian View of the Small Faith Community*, included a paragraph on "Deceptive Patterns" contrasted with "Authentic Patterns" of discernment.[317] He acknowledges that the distorted material and psychological values of society, such as winning at all costs, working to exhaustion and brilliance in public appearance, may well be present in some form within a spiritual community. English invites such communities to reflect on societal as well as communal weaknesses in order to be alert to possible false consolations.

In the Roman Catholic tradition the spiritual director/directee relationship was marked by a differential of experience, wisdom and in the monastic culture also of power. In the desert context such a relationship of spiritual guidance required unconditional obedience and surrender of the person seeking such guidance to the elder and wiser hermit. In the Ignatian context the power differential was established between the head of the order and its members. Obedience was absolute in this context. In contemporary culture, however, this differential has shifted toward a more egalitarian, collaborative effort.

Marjorie Thompson lists the following five 'responsibilities' in answer to the question, what does a spiritual director do?

1. *A spiritual guide listens to us.*

2. *A spiritual guide helps us to notice things.*

3. *A spiritual guide helps us to respond to God with greater freedom.*

4. *A spiritual guide helps us to practical disciplines of spiritual growth.*

5. *A spiritual guide will love us and pray for us.*[318]

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316 Ibid., 90.

317 English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community,* 138–139.

318 Thompson, *Soul Feast,* 110–111.

Thompson recognises that "[s]piritual direction, classically understood, is essentially a relationship of a teacher and learner", but acknowledges that in the present time, as the relationship progresses the differential gradually dissolves, replaced by a more mutual friendship.[319] She furthermore suggests, that "Protestants are, for the most part, more comfortable in patterns of relationship without authoritarian overtones, often preferring to enter into "a mutual relationship of guidance".[320]

The leaning towards a more egalitarian communal practice of spiritual guidance has found an expression in group spiritual direction which Sr. Rose Mary Dougherty characterises as follows:

> In group spiritual direction people learn to listen to God's Spirit at work in them for others in the group. As they take the sharing of others into the resting place of shared silence they seek to respond to what has been disclosed out of that prayerful place. Thus there is a collective wisdom available for each person. Whereas in one-to-one direction there is a single other person to lend vision to the directee, a group affords the possibility of many faces of truth being uncovered in any given situation. Persons are challenged to take the words of others into the place of Mystery where they can claim what is real for them.[321]

The "many faces of truth" are the invaluable asset of the communal discernment process in the ministry of group spiritual direction. But it is the commitment to the deep belief that God speaks into the lives of ordinary people, in the ordinary circumstances of their lives today, and that ordinary people have the openness to attune themselves to God's leading, that lends this ministry an enduring attraction.

Pulling together the threads

In this and in the previous chapter I have traced some of the origins of the ministry of spiritual direction which has become a significant contributor to the lives of Christians across all

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319   Ibid., 108–109.

320   Ibid., 112–113.

321   Rose Mary Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction.* New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1995, 36.

denominations. As a personal discipline, spiritual discernment still resonates with the ancient practices of the desert dwellers, who gave up the worldly and physical comforts of life for the sake of loving God and following their yearning for an experience of union with God while still living an earthly life. Because this process involved total involvement and required each person's complete attention some of the practitioners came to be so purified in body, mind and spirit, so detached from personal desires, that a direct experience of God came into reach. Augustine, himself a fervent practitioner of contemplative prayer describes such an experience as being raised "higher and step by step passed over material things, even the heaven itself from which sun and moon and stars shine down to earth. And still we … came to our own souls, and we went beyond our souls to reach that region of never-failing plenty where *Thou feedest Israel* forever with the food of truth." [322]

Desert spirituality was not about perfection but striving for perfection was the stepping stone for rare exceptional moments of union. The yearning to be obedient to God's will echoes through the communal discernment practices from the times of the desert spirituality to this day. The process of learning a relationship was pivotal to the desert dweller's spiritual progress. At the heart it was the ability to follow the direction of a more experienced elder with unconditional obedience. The format of this type of directive relationship was further developed as the monastic life style began to flourish. Later it became an enduring part of the wider practice of spiritual direction.

Ultimately, the intuitive, unattainable gift of discernment is grounded in the uncontrollable presence and activity of the Spirit. This view is, however, balanced by others who, without denying the spiritual origin of the gift of discernment, underscore discernment as something which can be practiced and honed as Ignatius' approach to spiritual direction demonstrated.[323] Ignatius' high view of each person's ability to discern God's will, empowered by the Spirit, in

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322 Augustine, *Confessions*, 200. Quoted in Richard Foster, *Prayer*, 173.

323 See in particular Maureen Conroy, *The Discerning Heart. Discovering a Personal God*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 1993. In chapter 13, 209–221, Conroy offers a section headed "Practical Learning Tools for Spiritual Directors" in which she introduces 4 reflective processes that would teach spiritual directors to hone their discerning capacities. This does not mean that spiritual discernment is understood as a technique or learnable skill, comparable to a communication technique. The gift of the Spirit to discern its movements in the affective movements of the inner life remains under the direction of the Spirit. Wolff, *Discernment. The Art of Choosing Well*, offers similar ideas in chapter 1, 79–88; and Stefan Kiechle, *The Art of Discernment. Making good decisions in your world of choices*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2005, especially chapters 3 and 4.

relation to the concrete decisions and circumstances of their lives over time and with the support

of spiritual guidance, resonates in many ways with Protestant, more specifically Reformed,

Wesleyan and Pietist, piety,[324] which will be the subject of the next two chapters.

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324 David Lonsdale confirms this 'Protestant flavour' when he points out that the practice of the *Exercises* "recognizes the importance in the Christian life of personal searching, personal appropriation of the biblical word of God, heartfelt conversion and individual commitment to Christ as the basis of Christian discipleship". In: *Dance to the music of the Spirit*, 139.

Chapter 7. Repentance and discernment in the Reformed tradition

In this chapter I will provide insight into the spiritual practices that grew out of the Reformed tradition, especially the practice of personal repentance. Personal repentance was and is to this day a practice of personal and communal renewal and a means to discern a path towards unity in the midst of conflict and schism. This chapter will begin with a discussion of John Calvin's understanding of discernment, repentance and the role of the Spirit. I will then use two contemporary examples from the life of the church that will illustrate Calvin's teachings on repentance. The first relates to the role of repentance in discernment as part of the process of church union of the Uniting Church in Australia. The second relates to a project that was conducted by the Presbyterian Church in the United States for the purpose of overcoming division and conflict.

I have so far focused almost exclusively on the roots of spiritual discernment practices in desert spirituality, the emerging monastic life and the ministry of spiritual direction as it developed within the Roman church. As Protestantism was birthed throughout the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance period, in the British Isles and continental Europe, it stated its own theological tenets which came to inform the practice of discernment both personally and communally. The following examples will illustrate this point.

John Calvin on discernment

John Calvin (1509–1564) was a foremost leader in the Swiss Reformation. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion.* (II, 2, 18–21)[325] Calvin presents his understanding of discernment as that situation in which human reason is confronted with the challenge to gain

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325   Jean Calvin. *The Institutes of the Christian Religion.* Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated and indexed by Ford Lewis Battles. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960. The Roman numerals that follow in brackets refer to the books of the Institutes, the Arabic numerals to the numbering of the paragraphs of each book.

knowledge of God, the knowledge of his paternal favour towards us, which constitutes our salvation, and the method of regulating of our conduct in accordance with the Divine Law. (II, 2, 18)

Calvin shows little respect for the powerless human reason when he declares it "blind as a mole", especially in relation to knowledge of salvation and the life of a saved person. He concedes that some philosophers' writings contain the occasional smattering of truth, however, buried under much falsehood. The claim of human blindness is given weight by quoting from the gospel of John, chapter 1 verses 4 and 5, explaining "darkness" as "void of all power of spiritual intelligence". (II; 2, 19) However, "believers", in embracing Christ, are "born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God," (John 1:13). What follows is Calvin's exposition of the utter dependence of a person's knowledge of God upon God alone, through the Spirit. Calvin asserts "that in spiritual things the human mind is wise only in so far as he [God] enlightens it." (II; 2, 20) Calvin consistently maintains the gap between knowledge apart from knowing God and human wisdom that is grounded in the Spirit. He affirms that spiritual things can only be discerned through the gift of the Spirit. Divine knowledge which comes from "hearing and learning" is the direct result of the Spirit's work who "with a wondrous and special energy, forms the ear to hear and the mind to understand." (II; 2, 20) Hearing and learning correspond to the offices of the preaching and the teaching elders who serve the faithful through preaching the Word and teaching the faith.

Individual discernment, in Calvin's thinking, belongs exclusively to the believer, since it is only available through the work of the Spirit, this "wondrous special energy". A believer is understood as one who has died to the old self with Christ in his crucifixion and has been raised with him into a regenerated new creation as Calvin explains in book III, 3, 8–9. Regeneration meant the restoration of the dormant *imago Dei*, the image of God which had been disabled through Adam's first transgression, original sin. True holiness and righteousness are simultaneously restored in the new creation and lived out as a divine work in progress. Calvin fights off critics who regard the presence of human fallibility, even after spiritual rebirth, as a sign of the ineffective nature of salvation. He argues that after rebirth, one must take the perspective of the

restored *imago* and strive to realise it through the process of lifelong repentance instrumental in performing the works of divine righteousness and loving the neighbour. (III, 3, 16) Repentance, for Calvin is the spiritual discipline which will keep the believer close to God and help her or him to discern the expressions of obedience that daily life requires from the moment of regeneration to death.

One of the most important spiritual practices each regenerated believer needs to engage in daily, is prayer. (III, 20, 1 and 50) Through prayer, taught and driven by the Spirit (III, 20, 5) faith is truly exercised which proves that prayer and faith belong together. Daily prayer is first of all praying as repentance. The believer's readiness to humbly repent and ask God's forgiveness constitutes the proper inner posture of prayer (III, 20, 8–9 and 16). Because prayer is grounded in faith and faith is grounded in the hearing of the Word of God, the faithful can be assured of God's hearing of his or her petitions. Calvin insists that in response to believer's trust her/ his requests will eventually be answered. Even if the believer's human frailty is a limiting factor in praying rightly, because the believer prays in the name of Christ. Because Christ is the only rightful and eternal mediator (III, 20, 17–20), whatever impurity or imperfection human prayer may contain, Christ's purifying and rectifying interceding work will make it right. Calvin finally addresses the prayer of the Assembly, claiming the interdependence of private and public prayer. (III, 20, 29) Those who refuse to pray in the solitude of their homes will not be capable of joining the public prayer of the worshipping community. And those who frequently participate in public prayer without practicing private prayer, are hypocrites.

In summary, in Calvin's thought, spiritual discernment is not given a privileged place. Discernment is a side effect of daily prayerful repentance. Once a person has entered into the saving relationship with God, regeneration takes place. From then on, a person's faith is continuously deepened and strengthened through participation in Word and sacrament, which receive their efficacy directly from Christ; and through the illuminating work of the Spirit which awakens the believer's mind to an ever growing awareness of God and self for the remainder of the believer's life. (IV, 14, 8) Prayer plays a central role in the life of the believer. It acts like a spiritual umbilical cord through which the believer maintains a close relationship with God,

whether through confession and repentance, prayer of praise or petition. In this way, a basis for discernment is laid.

Repentance and discernment in Church Union negotiations of the Uniting Church in Australia

Seeking to unite different Protestant denominations into new churches was a feature of Protestant ecumenism in the last century. It was an expression of the fundamental insight that Protestant schisms had to be reversed to bear any credibility in the eyes of the world. But bringing denominations with several hundred years of history, polity and ministry together into a united body was not easy. The fact that three denominations, the Presbyterian Church, the Congregational Church and the Methodist Church of Australia found a way to become the Uniting Church in Australia was in no small part due to the theological ground work done by the Scottish Reformed missiologist Lesslie Newbigin (1909–1998). Newbigin held radically to the view that the unity of the church and its effectiveness and credibility in mission were inextricably linked because those who were justified sinners could only testify to the transformative power of that justifying love by being reconciled, e.g. unified with one another. Without such unity Christ's love had lost its attraction, moreover its transformative power. In Newbigin's own words, without unity the church would

> be able to show to the world a splendid variety of activities and services. But one thing it would not be able to do. It would not – in common honesty – be able to stand before those outside and offer to them the secret of reconciliation with God through Christ. Having confessed to itself that common membership in Christ is not *by itself* enough to hold men together in one fellowship, how could it confess to the world that Christ is its only redeemer?[326]

Not to realise unity with one another, for Newbigin, was equal to betraying the redeeming power of Christ's Gospel. A justification by faith that did not express itself in a unified community of justified believers was no justification at all. Hence Newbigin urged:

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326   J.E. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church. A Defence of the South India Scheme.* London: SCM Press, 1960, 13.

> If congregational life is not to dissolve altogether, men have to allow themselves to be driven back to this fundamental fact, that Christ died for them and for their friends and for their enemies – for on no other fact can the common life of the congregation hold together.[327]

In a unique way Newbigin had woven ecclesiology and missiology into one another finding their twin-being in soteriology. When Newbigin talked about "a congregation" he meant Christians from all denominations without exception. To be sure, unity did not mean uniformity. Newbigin never slipped into trivialising denominational differences. They had "to be faced with fullest seriousness and realism." A Christian community was given the chance of overcoming such differences because of "a common debt to the Redeemer." This debt signified the deepest level of connection with others. It formed the basis for "the bond of mutual love" and was itself a loving response to Christ's redeeming sacrifice. Denominational differences which had led to a fragmentation of the unity of the church were, in Newbigin's mind, nothing more than additions to the Gospel and denominational divisions were not of spiritual but of carnal origin.[328] The Church, on the other hand,

> in its true nature is founded on the Gospel alone, because the Gospel is not a human construction but the news of what God has done. To add anything to the Gospel is to corrupt the sources of the Church's life and to reduce it to the level of human association based on some identity of belief or practice. In that sense every movement towards reunion must involve a process of simplification. A stripping away of things which are not of the essence of the Gospel itself in order that the Gospel may be apprehended afresh in all its simplicity.[329]

Becoming more truly the Church and making it more truly a mission to the world[330] then is an inevitable consequence of stripping away the things that hide the essence of the Gospel of God's redeeming Grace in Christ. The process of working towards union consequently consists of the

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327 Newbigin, *Reunion*, 14.

328 See ibid., 18.

329 Ibid., 18.

330 See for this phrase also Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin. A Theological Life*. Oxford: University Press, 2000, 83ff

careful removal of anything that proves to be non-essential, a removal that often began with the confession that the church had unduly held on to things not of God.

For Newbigin, the Church's unity was a the reality "of one divine organism, the Body of Christ, existing in time and space, yet showing the life of eternity. Visible unity and continuity are of its essence."[331] The spiritual reality of unity has to take shape in the reality of Christian lives which express most immediately the outworking of Christ's redeeming work in the world. Unity is the key relational quality which makes Christ's love visible in the world. Based on these premises and convictions some of those who were instrumental in the long, drawn out process of union negotiations used Newbigin's thinking to move them toward their goal.

Preparing for Church Union through listening

Consultations among three different denominations not only meant talking and persuading, but it required intent and thorough listening to the different positions each party brought to the table. In the Joint Committee's members' mind a commitment to listening meant a receptiveness to the others that involved the whole person in his (in this case only "his") intellectual, intuitive, emotional, imaginative faculties combined with a heightened openness to discern action. The unreserved receptive inner posture was at once focused on God's Word, on the contributions of the other members and on a vision of the Church as One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

The Joint Commission's report makes ample reference to this type of "listening". On one occasion the report interprets the listening to the Creeds and Confessions in the Church not in terms of the dry study of dead peoples' faith but as a real life conversation between faithful partners, present and past. It posits that "[t]he proper use of Creeds and Confessions in the Church means that from generation to generation men of faith speak to each other … It is an appeal … by one man of faith to another man of faith …" [332] From such conversations between the faith of the past and faith of the present, lives in the present were moved. In this work of awakening new faith the activity of the Spirit was becoming tangible. One of the authoritative

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331 Newbigin, *Reunion*, p 26
332 *The Faith of the Church*, 22.

texts was the Barmen Declaration which, when studied, caused the Commissioners to challenge each other with the following four questions, questions that would later guide their shared spiritual discerning:

(a)   Is our message unequivocally conditioned by what God has said to man in Jesus Christ?

(b)   In listening to that Word have we sought the aid and guidance of our confessing forebears?

(c)   Are those of us who value the traditions of the past and cherish them, equally prepared to confess the Faith afresh in the present? Are we only confessionalists, or are we also confessing Christians?

(d)   Are we facing the world, or are we just facing each other?[333]

The rigour of this critical inspection directed the negotiating partners' attention to what ultimately mattered. It helped to sharpen their ears in an emerging rhythm of listening, hearing, realising, risking and acting and they became willing to face God, each other and the situation in which they found themselves.

The turning point

In its radical questioning of what should become the uniting churches' new common basis, the Joint Commission eventually came to a turning point. Andrew Dutney summarises this moment in terms of a redirection of

> the attention of the divided parties from their own controversy to the more urgent controversy which God had with them all: God's call to witness, mission and service in their time and place.[334]

The shared perception that God had a common issue with them all turned into a willingness to hear God's call to witness, mission and service anew. It generated in the members of the Joint

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333   Ibid., 28.
334   Andrew Dutney, *Manifesto of Renewal. The Shaping of New Church.* Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1986, 21.

Commission a collective attitude of repentance culminating in the confession to God and to one another of

> the partial character of our vision, the confusion of our preaching, the poverty of our worship, and the weakness of our fellowship … There is a given Faith, but we do not yet know it in its fullness; we have not spoken of it as we ought.[335]

The move to repentance and the confession of a jointly recognised failure to embody the fullness of the God-given Faith with a capital "F", larger and fuller than its denominational manifestations, fuelled a growing commitment to let go of the partial character of their respective visions and practices and concentrate on what constituted the Faith they all had in common. This move signified no less than a shift from a *second order* disunity to a *first order* unity. In other words, the three negotiating parties could agree that God had approached them first. By God's Grace they had been invited into an ongoing relationship with God. This was the overriding core, the binding truth and foundation of the Church's life. All other differences in doctrine and polity were secondary and therefore negotiable.[336]

The emergence of a "uniting" hermeneutic

In terms of the general process from its humble beginnings to its arrival at a common *Basis of Union* Reformed theologian and New Testament Scholar Davis McCaughey identifies "four great moments in the way from disunion to union"[337] or four "decisions"[338] as he later called them, which I will outline as a way of summarising the path and outcome of discernment. In these four moments we find the building blocks for what I call a "hermeneutics of uniting" which contains important elements for a practice and theology of communal discernment.

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335 *The Faith of the Church,* 29.

336 Andrew Dutney develops this idea in more detail in the first Chapter of his *Manifesto for Renewal,* 11–27.

337 John Davis McCaughey, 'Church Union in Australia' 38–53. In: *The Ecumenical Review,* Vol. 17, 1965, 38. McCaughey repeats here in four points what has been told in the Joint Commission's Report on *The Faith of the Church,* 29–30.

338 McCaughey, 'The Formation of the Basis of Union', 1–16. 12ff. In: Peter Matheson and Christian Mostert, (eds.), *Fresh Words and Deeds. The McCaughey Papers.* Victoria, Australia: Peter Ringwood Publishing, 2004.

The given character of the Church's Faith

McCaughey firstly points to the "given character of the Church's Faith".[339] This is Faith with a capital "F" which is "no invention of men, but a gift of God; and we praise His Holy Name for this incomparable treasure."[340] The doxological character of this statement is more than a mere formula. It points to the place of origin of Faith in the Worship life of the church as a whole and its individual members. Personal and corporate prayers of praise and thanksgiving are thus recognised as generators of faith. As the Church is faithful to God's call to preach the crucified and risen Christ, he becomes present to those who listen: "[I]n every age those who live within the Church's fellowship and listen to her words hear Christ Himself speak and live."[341] By disclaiming ownership of their Faith the negotiating parties revert back to the One from whom they received it. Not their doctrinal descriptions matter, but the One who gave new life to each of them. Thus by confessing God as the originator of their Faith, by putting themselves into the hands of someone greater than themselves, the three parties became willing and ready to enter into a body unified by the same One.

Confession of the churches' failure to bear witness to its Faith in its fullness

The movement from insisting on their own confessions to entering into a new process of confessing the Faith together brought about a movement of repentance that transformed a previously unresolvable controversy to an openness for forming new relationships.[342] Within the context of this controversy, "[another] controversy breaks through to our imagination," Davis McCaughey professes, in which the participants found themselves engaged in "the issue of faith or unbelief, of obedience or disobedience."[343] Engaging in the confession of their own precipitation of division put each commissioner up against his personal and his church's

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339   McCaughey, 'Church Union in Australia', 43.

340   *The Faith of the Church*, 29.

341   Ibid., 29.

342   This is an almost identical movement to that already reported in the discussions of the Presbyterian Church of the US in agenda 2, 120ff which begs the question whether repentance has to be treated as a necessary movement of renewal in a time of conflict.

343   John Davis McCaughey. 'Confession of Faith in Union Negotiations.' 23–46. In: *Midstream*, Volume 6, No. 3, 1967, 35.

participation in it, thus revealing the very scope of the process of turning away from those actions that the commissioners needed to change. As they did so, the sincerity of their common confession effectively shattered each church's attachment to its own denominational correctness and division could not prevail. The movement towards union gained momentum but more was left to be done.

In spite of divisions God has blessed each church by His Word

In this third movement the equalising thrust in union negotiations comes to the fore. A meaningful and lasting union from a human point of view could ultimately only occur between partners who recognised each other's basic equality. There was, in fact, great inequality in membership numbers at the time of negotiations. Membership statistics of 1976, the year before the inauguration of the Uniting Church, showed that the Congregationalists had 53,444, Methodists 983,240 and Presbyterians 899,950 members.[344] If these numbers had been the basis for union negotiations the parties could have fought forever over who should be most influential in the shaping of its new set of policies. But the ground for equality was not located in each of the church's size or achievements but in God's blessing of their humble attempts to preach God's Word, however inadequately. In spite of the three churches' confession that their preaching was "[f]rail, broken, ignorant, inadequate," the Joint Commission affirmed that

> God in his transcending mercy has used [their preaching] to come to His People and to enable His People to worship Him … We have deserved nothing, we have earned nothing; yet, even in our sinful, divided state, God has not left us. We can still hear His Word … and receive His Son in the sacraments of a divided Church, we can still discern the lineaments of a fellowship of the Holy Spirit in our denominational huddles.[345]

Thus through the gift of God's presence in Word and Sacrament, which God bestowed on each of God's churches, the negotiating parties became partners. They were partners' in frailty yet

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344   Bentley & Hughes, *The Uniting Church in Australia*, 47.
345   *The Faith of the Church*, 30.

blessed and reconciled to God despite of themselves. McCaughey summarises it in Pauline terms, "*while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.*"[346]

With God's help the parties enter more fully into the Church's Faith

Now, that the churches had acknowledged their Faith as God's gift to them, confessed the partiality of their witness to that Faith and recognised God's blessing in spite of it; now that the churches had become partners in their sinful and justified humanity, it is time to enter into the fourth and last movement which represents in real terms the stepping over the threshold from disunion to union. McCaughey paraphrases this movement again in Pauline terms with the famous rhetorical question:

> Are we to continue to sin that grace may abound? … And the answer must be, that we have been delivered from the past in order to seek a new life in Christ: a basis of union is not thought of primarily as a negotiated agreement between men but as a call to the churches to come together and seek amendment of life.[347]

Seeking amendment to life in obedience is the consequence of sincere repentance and accepting forgiveness. Any confession that is worth its salt must lead to a fresh impulse to implement the new actions the sinner is now able to see. This is no different for an individual than for a community. In all of this the work of the Spirit is instrumental.

The four movements that led the three denominations to union signify four intersecting moments between God and a group of members of the church at a particular time in history. Although the mindset of this group was very much shaped by the ecumenical priorities of its time, justification by faith as a corporate reality for the sake of unity, the participants were able to speak and act on the Faith of the Church in greater fullness and as a result became a "uniting" church.

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346 McCaughey, 'Church Union in Australia', 43.
347 McCaughey, 'Church Union in Australia', 42.

Whenever the question is asked, as the Commissioners did, what is God's will for us now? a process of spiritual discernment is imminent. As a "uniting hermeneutics of discernment" each movement or step takes on a reflective stage in the discernment process. This reflective process acted like a key that unlocked new pathways of insight and action in relation to church union. As the Commissioners entered into the Faith not of their making (movement 1), they relinquished control over the outcome of their negotiations. This meant a stepping back from the project of redefining the Church's Faith in doctrinal terms and embracing a foundation for their shared Faith that was impermanent and imperfect, yet reliant on the rich diversity of previous confessions and the witness of the scriptures. By accepting the diversity of doctrinal documents they moved away from one exclusive version of the Faith but allowed the confessions of the church to shed light onto one another, revealing the shape and content of Faith itself in a new light. Accepting the givenness of the Church's Faith meant a humble acceptance of their partial knowledge of it at all times, including the present time. It also entailed the acknowledgement of an all pervading, lasting relationship that had been initiated in all its fullness by Godself and is kept alive by the active Spirit of God. It is precisely *this relationship* that is greater than the Church, over which the Church cannot exercise control, yet to which every human being has free access in faith through grace. The given Faith of the Church represents God's open invitation to enter into a relationship of complete participation without, however, relinquishing its origin in divine Love. By acknowledging the "given" character of the Church's Faith, the Commissioners exercised this very Faith by relinquishing control, stepping back from the power of their own doing, handing over their hope for union into the hands of God and the work of the Spirit. Thus they could say,

> The faith which the Church holds then is not something which it works out for itself. It has been delivered to the saints. It derives from the good news that Jesus Christ was delivered over to the hands of sinful men for our salvation and that he was raised from the dead, ascended and shed forth his Holy Spirit to bear witness to him in the Church. This faith is no invention of men, but a free gift of God.[348]

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348   *The Faith of the Church.* In: Rob Bos, Geoff Thompson, (eds.), *Theology for Pilgrims. Selected Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia.* Sydney, Uniting Church Press, 2008, 43.

The second example below represents a more recent example of the Reformed practice of repentance leading to discerning a way forward through division.

Repentance and Discernment in the PCUSA

The Presbyterian Church in the USA is a voice that has articulated its commitment to communal discernment as hope for unity.[349] In 2001 the 213th Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA commissioned a theological task force called "Peace, Unity and the Purity of the Church" which later issued a report, headed *A Season of Discernment*[350] approved by the 217th Assembly in 2006. The task force was charged

> to lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century, using a process which includes conferring with synods, presbyteries, and congregations seeking the peace, unity, and purity of the church …

and

> to develop a process and an instrument by which congregations and governing bodies throughout our church may reflect on and discern the matters that unite and divide us, praying that the Holy Spirit will promote the purity of the Presbyterian Church.[351]

The report draws from a wide variety of resources and has the unity of the church at heart, "in the face of deep disagreements" (15/16).[352] In the course of its 5 year work the task force had been directed to discern the way forward in 4 areas beset with deep rifts among members yet definitive for the whole of the church's Christian identity: biblical authority and interpretation, Christology, ordination standards and power (21/22 and 416). Because the church lives in "unique times", its unique callings must be discerned afresh. The text states:

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349 Jill Tabart's record of the introduction of Consensus procedures to the WCC shows the central role the WARC (World Alliance of Reformed Churches) played in trialling Consensus procedures early and urging their introduction. See Jill Tabart, *Coming to Consensus. A Case Study for the Churches*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2003, 54–55. During the consultations in 2002 Charles Olsen took a special role in preparing members for a more discerning approach to decision making. Ibid., 53.

350 *A Season of Discernment*. The Final Report of the Task force on Peace, Unity and the Purity of the Church. http://oga.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/finalreport/final-report-revised-english.pdf Accessed 25/08/2010.

351 Ibid., after the cover page.

352 The numbers in brackets refer to the numbering of the lines that runs throughout the report. There are no other page numbers.

Although God knows us fully, we do not always think and act as though we know God. Embodying God's purposes in our time and place requires that we rely on God's grace and cultivate wisdom, committing ourselves to faithful prayer, study, worship, and works of mercy and justice. We must seek the will of God revealed in the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit as we discern our unique calling in these unique times. (132–136)

The task force had not been asked to develop a new creed for its church but to name the issues that caused divisions at the heart of the life of the church and devise a pathway forward to new unity. The main tool to be used in this process of discerning a unified rather than scattered deposit of faith, was consultation. The structure of the report unfolds as an interpretation of a simple three-fold statement followed by three questions:

"God

- loves us,

- saves us, and

- empowers us with a calling and commission

These three convictions are the basis for our response to three enduring questions of spiritual discernment:

- What does the loving revelation that is ours in Jesus Christ enable us to know?

- What does this saving revelation prompt us to hope?

- What does this empowering revelation call us to do?" (28–34)

Some answers to these questions can be found in the section headed "Spiritual progress" (11, 296–388). These lines disclose the spiritual relational processes which permeated the process of discernment, the ethos that steered the discussions of the task force throughout, thus facilitating the formation of a discerning community. The opening statement of this paragraph reads, "Over the last five years, we have had two remarkable experiences as a group, one of pain and penitence, the other of gratitude and joy" (297/298). In the sentences that follow the authors describe a process of repentance and conversion, not in relation to their theological convictions

but in their relationships to one another and to the wider church. The change is recorded in the following words:

> At that early point, we, the members of the task force, shared a tendency that is widespread in the church: to blame others, especially those with whom we disagree, for the church's troubles. Our process and the covenant we adopted to guide our work together, however, emphasized careful listening as much as self expression. In the course of our work we began to understand that our own actions as much as others' have offended God, wounded the body of Christ, and caused pain to other Presbyterians. (p 11, 307–312)

In their endeavour to find unity the task force realised that it in fact represented a relational microcosm of the macrocosm of the wider church. Apportioning blame, stereotyping and/or demeaning a disagreeing party were faced squarely as sins that signified obvious stumbling blocks to finding unity. In addition, the document headed the "Covenant"[353] had supplied each member with the description of an ethos of openness, vulnerability and willingness to listen to one another which brought to light the absence of love and grace in pertinent areas of the relational-spiritual realm. The task force confessed:

> Though we know that by stereotyping and demeaning one another we have hurt not only our opponents, but also ourselves and the whole church, we cannot claim that we have recognized all the ways we have damaged the church and hurt one another. Nor can we claim that we have amended our lives adequately to signal full repentance for the harm we have done. What we can report is that as we became more deeply acquainted with one another's thinking and life situations, we were chastened and humbled by the recognition that insofar as the body of Christ in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) is broken, we have all played a part in betraying and denying our Savior and in inflicting the damage from which the church, as His body, is suffering today. The recognition that the travail of the church is our fault as much as it is others', sobered and saddened our task force but also brought us closer together. (340–349)

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353 The full text of the "Covenant" can be found at:
    http://oga.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/finalreport/final-report-revised-english.pdf Accessed 3/02/2011. Accessed 03/02/2012

The repentant tone and substance of this confession communicates the reality of the spiritual growth of the task force's members in convincing ways. It defies any suspicion that it might simply be a political or strategic move designed to create an impression of unity. The "disciplines of listening and reflecting" became instrumental in finding common ground and in identifying shared convictions, as well as holding on to difference, yet without the need for rejection. The task force reports that as a result

> [w]e also heard the gospel anew and felt the spirit of Christ in the words and deeds of our fellow task force members. Repeatedly, we found ourselves moved and impressed by the depth and truth of statements made by our colleagues, including those whose backgrounds and experiences are very different from our own. Most surprisingly, our faith was enriched and strengthened by the contributions of those whose views on contested issues we do not share. (357–361)

Through the process of genuine repentance a new path to unity opened up and relationships were transformed. The unity that was found did not consist in agreement on all controversial issues. Disagreement remained, however, not as a cause for division. The bonds of love that had been restored through the process of repentance had become the foundation for a shared journey of learning and listening into the future. Repentance as a communal process freed the relationships of this commission up for the freedom to reconnect and collaborate as part of the one body of Christ.

Pulling together the threads

Despite of the fact that discernment does not rank high in Calvin's thinking about spiritual practices his teachings on prayer as the daily exercise of repentance before God has had a significant impact on situations beset with division and conflict over a period of several hundred years. There is an obvious parallel of a transformative pattern in both examples. In both contexts listening carefully and openly to those who were formerly viewed as enemies or adversaries brought about new understanding. However it was the process of admitting fault and confessing sins in relationship to the other that effected radical change. In light of confession all sides found

themselves in the same position, standing before Christ as those who needed forgiveness. Once broken relationships had been restored discerning a way forward became possible.

In this chapter I have provided further evidence for the second set of propositions which stated that when a group of people gather to exercise their faith in the hope of finding spiritual direction, interactions become spiritual practices. When confessions of sin between persons are embedded in the gift of forgiveness the transforming work of the Spirit creates new beginnings and moves relationships to a new place of wholeness, as the two examples above have demonstrated.

Chapter 8. The Wesleyan and Pietist influence on Communal discernment

John Wesley (1703–1791), the man who was instrumental in the Evangelical Revival at the end of the 18th century in Britain, was compelled not only to preach the Gospel but also to care for the converted. One of Wesley's core concerns related to preventing newly converted men and women from backsliding. He loathed the idea "that people of any place should be half-awakened and then left to fall asleep again".[354] His logic was that as long as a new believer moved forward she or he was unable to slide back. Holiness, that is the spontaneous overflow of love of God and neighbour in response to God's unconditional love in Christ, then resulted in a life in accordance with the teachings of Christ and the moral standards of the ten commandments. Becoming more and more conformed to a life that expressed Christ's love and his purity of heart and action became identified with the notion of growing in faith. Growing in faith, in turn, had to be secured through the practice of a spiritual discipline. As Wesley asserted: "The soul and body make a man; the Spirit and discipline make a Christian."[355]

The Wesleyan spiritual small group network

Inspired by the primitive Christians, the Reformers, the Puritans and the Moravians, and urged by his converts as well as by his lay preachers, Wesley established his own version of a small group network, *societies, bands and classes*, which enabled him to keep a close eye on the progress of the newly converted and those lay leaders who had committed themselves to caring for them. Wesley summarised the purpose of a society with its class meetings like this:

> a society is no other than a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their own salvation.[356]

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354   John Wesley, *Journal* Vol. I. In: Arthur Skevington Wood, *The Burning Heart. John Wesley: Evangelist.* Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1967,188.

355   Skevington Wood, *The Burning Heart.* Quoted from John Wesley's *Journal*, Vol. III, 490. 17th August 1750, 187.

356   Ibid.,190.

Working out their salvation, or better, remaining in the state of salvation and growing deeper into the life of a saved person was not merely a private but a communal project. Therefore any person who had been saved and wished to live in accordance with God's will was welcome to join a society. In *The Nature, Design and General Rules of the United Societies of 1743* Wesley wrote that any person who wanted to become the member of a *society* could do so, but had to commit to

> avoiding evil of every kind, doing good, and attending on all the ordinances of God – public worship, the ministry of the Word, the Lord's Supper, family and private prayer, Bible study, and fasting or abstinence.[357]

Striving for impeccable moral conduct was a sign that the old creation was increasingly blotted out and the reality of the new creation was coming into effect. Salvation, that is the experience of justification by grace brings about faith and faith as the response of love to God's love, leads to a sanctified life manifesting in the practice of good works. Holiness arises out of a relationship between a person and God that yearns to be consummated in perfect love. Such perfect love is nothing but the "fulfillment of faith's desire to love God above all else".[358] Salvation, faith, holiness and good works thus form an inseparable, integrated whole in which the believer lives the Christian life. Albert C. Outler explains this process further:

> This [holiness] is not a state but a dynamic process: saving faith is its beginning; sanctification is its proper climax. As faith is in order to love, so love is in order to goodness – and so also goodness is in order to blessedness. This complex pattern of means and ends is designed to unfold in the life process itself … It is as if Wesley had … turned the Eastern notion of a vertical scale of perfection into a genetic scale of development within historical existence.[359]

By following the recommendations pertaining to a disciplined life the believer's growth in faith was ensured. Spiritual obedience to the universal character of grace was a key aspect of Wesley's

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357   Ibid.,190.

358   In: Albert C. Outler, (ed.), *John Wesley*. New York: University Press, 1964 and 1980, 32, 85–86.

359   Ibid., 31.

understanding of a faithful or sanctified life, or a life in "maturity of consistent obedience."[360] In this sense, the emerging class system, a kind of small group spiritual support system, became part of the church's means of grace. David Lowes Watson gives the following description of it:

> Wesley felt it was important to ground this catholicity of grace … specifically in the instituted means of grace afforded by the disciplines of the church. In this way, the societies, classes and bands fulfilled their true purpose. Precisely because the *ecclesia* provided the doctrinal structure for the Christian faith, those in the *ecclesiola* were free to respond to the inner promptings of the Spirit. The "little churches" were formed with the avowed purpose of remaining within the larger church in order to call it back to its own essentials; and their members were given guidance in religious experience and spiritual nurture only to the extent that the doctrines and the ordinances of the Church of England were pre-supposed.[361]

In making space for the inner promptings of the Spirit in the classes Wesley followed the "overriding imperative" that originated in the Puritan Spirit, by exercising "the criterion of direct religious experience which he added to the Anglican theological trilateral, that was scripture, tradition, and reason".[362] Wesley outlined the activity of the Spirit and how it imbued spiritual experience in Sermon 10, entitled *The Witness of the Spirit*. He explains:

> by the testimony of the Spirit, I mean, an inward impression on the soul whereby the Spirit of God immediately and directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given himself for me; that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.[363]

Resonating with Romans 8:16ff Wesley conceived of the Spirit's witness as awakening assurance of faith, thus launching the struggling convert into a life of regenerated sanctification. Arguing that the primacy of the Spirit's work is the sanctification of the human soul Wesley believed that

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360   See David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting. Its Origins and Significance.* Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002, 126.

361   Ibid., 126.

362   Ibid., 126.

363   *Sermon X: The Witness of the Spirit, Discourse I.7.* In: *Sermons on Several Occasions. First Series.* By The Rev. John Wesley, A.M. London: Epworth Press. This edition first published 1944. Twenty-third impression 2009, 115.

the testimony of the Spirit of God must … be antecedent to the testimony of our own spirit, [and it] may appear from this single consideration: We must be holy in heart and life before we can be conscious that we are so. But we must love God before we can be holy at all, this being the root of holiness. Now we cannot love God, till we know he loves us: We love him, because he first loved us: And we cannot know his love to us, till his Spirit witnesses it to our spirit. Till then we cannot believe it; we cannot say, "The life which I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."

The movement of the Spirit of grace has its origin in God's self. From there it fills the heart of the believer with the overwhelming desire to respond in love for God, neighbour and even self. On this theological foundation Wesley began to build his spiritual small group network.

How were Wesleyan classes run? Meetings were normally held in private houses, beginning at eight of the clock in the evening.[364] There was singing and praying, followed by the leader sharing his or her experience of the week. A critic of Wesley's classes, Joseph Nightingale, wrote a *Portraiture of Methodism* which offered a detailed description of a meeting without withholding his disapproval. The person sharing would usually tell of

[h]is joys, and his sorrows; his hopes and his fears; his conflicts with the world, the flesh, and the devil; his fightings without and his fears within; his dread of hell, or his hope of heaven; his pious longings and secret prayers for the prosperity of the church at large, and for those his brothers and sisters in class in particular … [T]he leader [then] proceeds to inquire into the state of every soul present; saying "Well sister, or well brother, how do you find the state of *your* soul this evening? The member then proceeds, without rising, to unbosom his or her mind to the leader; not, as often has been said, by particular confession, but by a general recapitulation of what has passed in the mind during the week. Such advice, correction, reproof, and consolation, is then

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364   Joseph Nightingale, *A Portraiture of Methodism: Being An Impartial View of the Rise, Progress, Doctrines, Discipline, and Manners of the Wesleyan Methodists. In a Series of Letters, Addressed to a Lady.* London: For Longmann, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1807, xi. Quoted in Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meetings*, 93–94.

given so the leader passes on to the next, and the next, until everyone has received a portion of meat in due season.

This kind of spiritual debriefing process in relation to weekly struggles and joys formed the basis for the meetings and created communal bonds. Being received, affirmed, encouraged and where necessary also admonished and corrected was the key to their effectiveness. While classes were kept open to everyone who had a desire to grow in faith, bands were strictly confined to those members who had the assurance of the remission of sins.[365] Wesley instructed the growing numbers of traveling lay preachers to closely examine the faith of each band member and only to hand out tickets to those who had passed the inquiries. This in itself was a demanding task of discernment. Over time about twenty percent of Methodist people met in bands, whereas anyone could attend a class. The fact that spiritual experiences and personal moral conduct were taking centre stage in the Wesleyan classes lent a unique liveliness to their gatherings and brought authenticity to members' growth in faith. Holy living moved within human grasp, even if only for a fifth of those who were active Methodists.

The language of discernment came especially into play when the state of faith of each class member needed to be ascertained. Wesley visited each cluster of classes quarterly. This allowed him to conduct interviews and view records that spoke to this issue. Wesley asked the following questions to the leader of a class to get a clear picture of the state of faith of a class: "Does this and this person in your class live in drunkenness or any outward sin? Does he go to church, and use the other means of grace? Does he meet as often as he has opportunity?"[366] In addition he had taught the class leaders to keep records with inconspicuous punctuations but specific meaning behind the name of every class member: "the letter (a) for one who was awakened; a question mark (?) for one whose state was *doubtful*; a period (.) for one who professed *the perfect love of God*."[367] Other classifications formalised the discernment further, for example, "*Formal Religion; Inward Religion; Praying for Repentance; for Mourners Convinced of Sin;* and

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365 Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley & Patterns of Church Renewal.* Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1980, 60ff.

366 Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meetings,* 105.

367 Ibid., 109. Italics in the original.

for *Believers Rejoicing, Fighting, Praying, Watching, Working, Suffering, Groaning for Full Redemption, Brought to the Birth, Saved, and Interceding for the World.*"[368]

Although Wesley adhered to a view of prevenient grace in the salvation event, which means that God's grace is already active in the life of every person preceding the salvation event, without hesitation, Wesley used a hierarchically constructed grid of judgements, from the bottom up, to discern the exact state of every member's salvation.[369]

Pietism and the emphasis on the priesthood of all believers

In the reformers' thinking the concept of the priesthood of all believers had played an important role. Luther, for example, delineated the notion of "the priesthood of all believers" from the special status that the Roman church had given to the pope, the bishops and priests. In his text, entitled, *To the Christian Nobility*, Luther insisted that "because we all have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel, and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people."[370] Based on 1 Peter 2:9 and Rev. 5:9–10, Luther explained the concept of the priesthood of all believers as something that by virtue of faith everyone was eligible for. The only notable difference between Christians relates to the office or work to which different persons may have been called. This office or vocation does, however, not add any status or greater worth to a person. In Luther's words,

> [t]here is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate … But they do not all have the same work to do.[371]

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368 Ibid., 110. Italics in the original.

369 See Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meetings*, 60–61.

370 LW 44:127 quoted in Cameron A. MacKenzie's essay on 'The "Early" Luther on Priesthood of All Believers, Office of the Ministry, and Ordination.' 1–17. At http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/mackenzieearlyluther.pdf Accessed 22/10/2011, 2.

371 WA 6:408.26–30: "*Szo folget ausz dissem, das leye, priester, fursten, bischoff, und wie sie sagen, geistlich und weltlich, keynen andern unterscheyd ym grund warlich haben, den des ampts odder wercks halben, unnd nit des stands halbenn, dan sie seyn alle geystlichs stands … aber nit gleichs eynerley wercks.*" Quoted in Cameron A. MacKenzie, 'The "Early" Luther on Priesthood of All Believers', 3. Italics part of the original.

Creating equality among Christians through the notion of 'the priesthood of all believers' attributed authority and responsibility to each person in maintaining their faithful relationship with God. It also redistributed the authority of the ecclesial offices. A person who was part of the priesthood of all believers was by the grace of God a discerning person in their own right.

Pietism and the *pious colleges*

The reformers' high esteem of personal faith experienced a renewal in the era of pietism, especially in terms of the question as to whether a person's faith was dead or alive. Small group communities emerged as an ideal context for the renewal of faith. Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705) is often regarded as the first outstanding proponent of German pietism. He was a man who wanted to see people saved and inspired to live holy lives and share the Good News rather than analysing the correct formulations of faith *ad infinitum*, as was standard practice in the Lutheran orthodoxy of his time. During his time in Frankfurt (1660–1686) Spener became well known for the creation of a Christian cell-group system he called "pious colleges" or "*collegia pietatis*." In the small groups of the pious colleges Spener found an ideal environment for effective mutual ministry carried by a high view of the priesthood of all believers. He had first come across a form of small community life in Geneva where in 1659 he had listened to Jean de Labadie (1610–1674), a former Jesuit novice and Protestant convert, who founded a spiritual community called the "Labadists".[372] The commitment of the Labadists to growing in faith together made a deep impression on Spener. He recognised the potential of small group ministry both in the pastoral and the educational realm. The pious colleges added something to the Christian life that had beforehand not been there. Ernest Stöffler describes what happened in the gatherings of these pious colleges:

> They were generally opened by Spener himself with prayer. Thereafter a given section
> of some edificatory work was read, and the reading was followed by discussion. The
> rule was that all academic subtleties must be shunned and only such conversations

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372   See Ernest Stöffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism*. Leiden: Brill, 1965, 229.

may be carried on as tend to edification. After 1675 only the Bible was read and discussed. The *collegia* were held on Monday and Wednesday. [373]

Spener was hoping to initiate a renewal of faith nurtured by the study of the Bible from within the church, rather than supporting the raising of a spiritual elite. Stöffler notes that

the *collegia pietatis* were not meant to be a means to separate "true" Christian from others and from imbuing the former with a pharisaical self-image … They were to be instrumentalities through which the Church was to be brought again to reflect the image of the early Christian community. [374]

In the communal practices of the *Labadists* Spener also encountered a form of community that trusted the believers to care for one another's spiritual welfare. His vision of the pious colleges was nurtured by an earnest desire to see regeneration actualised in believers' lives. Similar to Wesleyan class meetings, his *ecclesiolae in ecclesiam* were not directed toward schism, but toward a grass roots renewal and authentic growth in faith. To that end he enlisted the members of each small group to "teach, warn, convert and edify each other".[375] Spiritual discernment as a ministry exercised by the believers is more implied than explicitly expressed. It might not be too far fetched to assume that discernment was exercised to help fellow Christians find their way on the path of discipleship and interpret the scriptures for daily life needs as they related to proper pious conduct and belief. Luther's and the Pietists' notion of every person being part of the priesthood of all believers empowered each believer to be a discerning person as part of an edifying and supportive small group faith network.

Pulling together the threads

The Protestant beginnings of personal discernment focused on true knowledge of God, revealed in the Scriptures, through the hearing of the Word and in the experience of conversion. Knowledge of God and knowledge of the fallen self went hand in hand and only became

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373 Ibid., 237.
374 Ibid., 237. Italics in the original.
375 Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening*, 57.

relevant in the process and event of salvation. As a person moved into the new life, reborn and regenerated, the process of ongoing discernment of a righteous and holy life began. From Calvin's perspective, the community came together to hear the Word of God and was formed by the Spirit to conform to its salvific and moral content. Thus the community as well as the person became reshaped in light of God's love and judgment. The fear of God and the call upon each Christian to glorify God was a central part of the discerning life in the Reformed tradition. The practice of ongoing repentance and asking forgiveness was both a hallmark of Calvin's humility and low view of human perfection, even when a person was elected and regenerated. But repentance as lifelong practice was also a confirmation that a pure and holy life was the process and goal of the regenerated life. For those who had received the restoration of the *imago Dei* through the work of the Spirit were made capable of living holy lives. Practising repentance and asking forgiveness of sin was that devotional practice which was placed into the responsibility of each believer to ever lessen the effect of the old creation and increase the life of the new creation. Imperfection and holiness thus remained in a lifelong paradox tension. Good works and pure moral conduct were to be the spiritual fruits of this practice, alongside the means of grace which were also the marks of the true church, listening to the Word rightly preached and the sacraments purely administered. Discernment was not lifted out of the new life of the Christian as a special charism but it was an integral part of its daily discipline.

The resolution of the penitentiary struggle and consistency in obedience, the hallmark of the regenerated and sanctified life, were pursued in the small groups of the Wesleyan classes as well as the pious colleges. Both Wesley and Spener had a view of the Christian life that involved a living faith and an active involvement in discipleship which included the care for the poor. The spiritual environment of the classes and pious colleges provided a hotbed for spiritual growth, perpetuated by the weekly practice of self-examination, giving advice, comfort and support. Similar to the practice of life-long repentance, Wesley taught the practice of life-long self-examination, except, for Wesley, the personal practice of self-examination was also practiced in the public space of the class meeting.

In this chapter I have illustrated how in the Wesleyan and Pietist influenced Protestant traditions, as part of the journey of the Christian life, personal and communal discernment became essential for the spiritual growth process. While for Calvin, the need for repentance signified the ever present difference between creator and creature, for Wesley self-examination in tandem with the other disciplines of prayer, reading the scriptures, admonishment and care for the poor, were possible expressions of a sanctified life. The sanctified life was an ever discerning life. Pietism empowered each person to exercise such discernment as part of their daily spiritual practices. Discernment was part of making decisions about moral conduct, but it was also at work in maintaining the involvement of the whole person in faithful living. While sanctification was understood as becoming increasingly absorbed into the saving love of God and allowing that love to overflow into the relationship with God, others and self, discernment was helpful in avoiding the pitfalls of sliding back into a pre-salvation life.

For those who were still caught up in the penitentiary struggle the focus of discernment was on the acquisition of that precious good, the assurance of faith that came with the liberating knowledge of forgiveness. For those who already possessed some measure of this assurance, the focus of discernment was on advancing into the sanctified life and acquiring constancy in obedience, that is love of God and of neighbour and following the rules of a sanctified life.

From his encounters with the Pietists Wesley both rejected and adopted elements of small group faith formation and methods of discipleship. He took on the preoccupation of the Pietists not only with an alive and ever growing faith, but also their obsession with stages and degrees of authenticity in conversion. This is how Wesley, who was a deep believer in the liberating grace of God, could take control over the faith of new converts with a system of criteria, meant to train the class leaders in making judgments about the state of faith of the members. Wesley was well aware of the leader's "duties [being] arduous, and his responsibility great: not only is it necessary that he should have a deep experience of God's mercies to his own soul, but that he should have a fervent love for the souls of others, and an extensive knowledge of the workings of the heart, of

the wiles of the wicked one, and of the word of God".[376] Clearly, Wesley's concern for the state of salvation of the newly converted was motivated by love and concern. However, categorising each converts' state of faith has not been a testimony for the freedom for which the children of God have been set free, according to Paul in Gal. 5:1. In conclusion, close adherence to the scriptures, a commitment to a living faith based on a personal conversion experience and concern with the authenticity of a lifelong faith – these are the elements that have required discernment as personal and communal practice in the evangelical tradition.

In the chapter that follows I will introduce those practices of communal discernment that have evolved among the tradition of the Friends, also called the Quakers. Silence and prayerful listening which are practices that have previously been recognised as important practices for discernment, have been developed, honed and uniquely integrated in Friend's way of doing business.

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376 Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting,* 115, quotes from Thomas Martin, *Thoughts on the Nature and Advantages of Class-Meeting, (As adopted by the Methodist Societies:)Including on Account of the Origin, Authority, and General Oeconomy of that Institution: Intended to Explain and Recommend it, to whomsoever it may concern.* London: Printed at the Conference Office by Thomas Coreaux, 1813. The portion of text above appeared as an excerpt in *The Independent Methodist Magazine* I (1826) 680–85, and the *Wesleyan Methodist Association Magazine* 4 (1841) 123–26.

Chapter 9. The origins of discernment in the tradition of the Friends, also called the Quakers

In this chapter I will discuss the Quakers' approach to communal discernment. It represents a unique form of this spiritual practice that has survived from its earliest days to this day. But Quakers' discernment it is not only peculiar due to its historic continuity, this way of decision making has become quite influential in a number of different contexts as I will explain below. I will begin by revisiting the origins of the Quaker movement and then move to the Quaker's present practice. In the course of this exploration the significance of the Quakers' contribution to communal discernment and decision making will come into full view.

British Quaker historian, John Punshon, suggests that it emerged out of the broad Puritan opposition to the administrative-ecclesial symbiosis between Church and State as a result of the English Reformation.[377] I will briefly touch on the Puritan movement and the period of Cromwell's reign because during this time a valuing of discernment that later influenced Quaker's practice began to surface.

The Puritan Movement

The term "puritan" first surfaced in 1564, during the so called "Vestiarian Controversy" during which Elizabeth I revoked the clergy's freedom to wear vestments of their choice during worship and ordered the wearing of particular liturgical garments. Those who resisted the change were called "puritans" to ridicule the dissenters' pettiness in matters of such insignificance as liturgical dress code.[378] Once the term came in use it not only labelled all those who opposed the new liturgical vestments but also those who more fundamentally disagreed with the union of church and state, because they believed that only Christ, according to the scriptures, could be regarded as the true Head of the church.

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377 John Punshon, *Portrait in Grey. A short history of the Quakers.* London: Quaker Home Service, 1984, 5–23.

378 *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica. Macropaedia* Vol. 26. 'The Reformation in England and Scotland.' 212–217. 213. See also: http://www.exlibris.org/nonconform/engdis/puritans.html Accessed 28/09/2005.

The Puritan Revolution can be understood as a period in history where puritan ideals were realised in public life on a scale not seen before. What were the key features of the Puritan life? Hugh Barbour describes the puritan as a person who was

> overwhelmed by the power and glory of God … [who] saw his own salvation as God's election and in no way under human control … The puritan's desperate moral earnestness was his protest against anything in the world that neglected or resisted divine power and law as interpreted through the Bible and the puritan conscience … The puritan … found himself set apart from other men. He was a stranger and a pilgrim … but his citizenship in the heavenly city did not make him otherworldly, for this world itself would be transformed into the New Jerusalem by God's power.[379]

The emphasis on being personally touched and saved by God's grace as an instance of total surrender to the almighty power of God was followed by an emphasis on visible sainthood. Personal purification flowed on into the purification of the church and was then completed in the purification of society. Personal conversion rippling into all realms of life became the hallmark of an English Puritan's life. Puritan characteristics manifested in clear distinction to original Calvinism as practiced by the Scots, the Swiss and other Reformed churches of Europe, which "expected neither spectacular conversions nor sinless churchmen."[380]

A Puritan based his/her life on the sense of being elected by God to serve God's glory and the conviction that God's Reign was about to break into their lives. Mark A. Noll summarises the heart of Puritanism in terms of four core convictions:

> (1) that personal salvation was entirely from God, (2) that the Bible provided the indispensable guide to life, (3) that the church should reflect the express teaching of Scripture, and (4) that society was one unified whole.[381]

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379 Hugh Barbour, *The Quakers in Puritan England.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964, 2–3.
380 Ibid., 3.
381 Mark A. Noll in his article 'Puritans, Puritanism.' At http://mb-soft.com/believe/txc/puritani.htm Accessed 30/11/2010.

Personal conversion was the beginning of the process of bringing in the Reign of God. Transforming the world into God's Realm was the only proper response to the gift of grace. The air of Puritan England was thick with end-time expectation.

During the period of the "Puritan Revolution", under Oliver Cromwell's (1588–1658) leadership, a constitutional change of monumental proportions took place. The Monarchy was abolished, the rule of the Anglican Church was terminated, Parliament was purged from any Presbyterian Royalists and a Commonwealth, ruled by a Council of State was declared.[382] Soon Puritan ethos and theology began to penetrate every aspect of public life in England. New values began to shape public life and public debate, foremost among them "equality". It came to the fore during Cromwell's early reign through free and open debate. Discussions about the possibilities of the priesthood of all believers fuelled the new open climate. Much theological debate took place in Cromwell's army. The following anecdote told by Douglas V. Steere best illustrates the spiritual and intellectual climate that enabled a new sense of shared discernment:

> Oliver Cromwell, the supreme commander of the Commonwealth army, gave instructions to his own aides that they must never deny access to any common soldier who wished to see him, for Cromwell feared that God might be speaking to him through that ordinary man and that if he did not listen to him the Lord might cast him off.[383]

Since Cromwell considered each common man as a potential messenger from God he inspired many of his soldiers to do the same. For a period of Cromwell's reign the commitment to the equality that is part of the emphasis on the priesthood of all believers dominated the public discourse. Unfortunately, the permissive atmosphere did not last long. Divisions in belief and practice eventually lead to an end of many a debate, ending in the construction of a new evangelical orthodoxy. [384]

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382 Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, 27.

383 Douglas V. Steere, (ed.), *Quaker Spirituality. Selected Writings*. Introduction by Douglas V. Steere, preface by Elizabeth Gray Vining. London: SPCK, 1984, 6.

384 See D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones's book *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth 1987, 234–235, quoted by Mark Ritchie in his article on Puritanism: http://www.apuritansmind.com/PuritanArticles/MarkRitchieEnglishPuritans.htm Accessed 25/09/2005.

A salient figure and contemporary of Cromwell was one of the founders of the Baptist movement, John Smyth (died in 1612). His writings showed ideas which proved to be precursors to what would become cornerstones of later Quaker teachings, particularly in relation to the practice of worship. He endorsed a style of worship which contained much silence and rejected any prepared sermons, prayers or even reading of Scriptures. By emphasising the spontaneity of a person's contribution he sought to make room for the promptings of the Spirit. When a person was prompted to speak he or she was obliged to follow. He suggested that if the Spirit was held back by remaining silent, then an opportunity to receive spiritual ministry was wasted. Many other things could quench the Spirit which Smyth stated as follows:

> The Spirit is quenched by silence when fit matter is revealed to one that sitteth by and he withholdest it in tyme of prophesying; the Spirit is quenched by sett formes of worship … Saying sett formes, of worship by rote is quenching the Spirit; & Reading sett formes or worship out of a book is quenching the Spirit … in the other the matter is not brought out of the hart, but out of the book; & so in neither of them the Spirit is at liberty.[385]

In this style of worship spontaneous utterings were regarded as more authentic and thus more edifying for the gathered community than the thoroughly formalised practices of the Anglican ecclesia. Similar to early Baptist practices, itinerant evangelism, exercising silence and waiting upon a direct inspiration of the Spirit were three of the early features of Friends' meetings.[386]

The Seekers were another group whose spiritual practices became later influential in the worship life of Friends.[387] Seekers in connection with the so called "Spirituals" had embraced a distinct view of the true church as being an invisible fellowship that existed in continuity with the early Apostolic Church of the first century. Drawing from the writings of the German Lutheran layman Sebastian Franck (1499–1548), they chose to turn away from sacraments, ecclesial traditions of any sort, even scripture, in favour of spiritual experiences. They emphasised the

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385   See John Smyth, *Works*, ed. W.T. Whitley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915, 269, 271, 275 and 277. Quoted in: Michael J. Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule. Voteless decisions in the Religious Society of Friends.* Published by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, second impression. West Chester: Pennsylvania, 1985, 126.

386   Ibid., 127.

387   For the following comments see Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, 23ff.

need for the presence of the Spirit and bemoaned the churches they perceived as void of the life of the Spirit. As part of their worship, they sat in silence and literally waited for the direct arrival of the Kingdom of God, in accordance with Jesus' call to repentance and readiness. They were convinced that as a result of a direct intervention of God a truly godly fellowship of believers would emerge. Many Seekers

> were solitary, some continued to attend public worship, but some came together in silent waiting in the spiritual conviction that very soon new prophets or Apostles, enjoying the miraculous powers that were the gifts of the Holy Spirit, would appear, to do away with the apostasy, still the clamour of the divided churches of the Reformation, and re-establish the true Church in visible glory and unity.[388]

The diversity in beliefs and practices provided the ferment from which the movement of the Quakers gained its membership and from which it drew heavily for the formation of its core practices and convictions.

First Meetings

"Friends" gathered informally as early as 1644, possibly before then, as clusters of families meeting as "Friends" or "Friends of Truth". Their intentions were twofold: to support each other in walking "according to the Truth", and to address in practical actions their concern for the poor.[389] Walking "according to the Truth" was a turn of phrase that related to the true state of their relationship with God. Estrangement from God was a common experience of the times. Being part of the fellowship of the "Friends" meant that this estrangement could be named and repented of. In the process of externalising personal alienation from God in front of an empathic audience a tenderness of heart developed which created a fertile ground for compassion and care. To be "tendered" became the enduring expression for the change a person underwent as a result of her or his "convincement", while conversion was understood as a lifelong journey.[390] The word "convincement" soon became a specific term for the process a person underwent to realise

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388   Ibid., 25.
389   Moore, *The Light in their Consciences*, 3.
390   See Brinton, *The Religious Philosophy of Quakerism*, 93.

that the way of the Quakers was the only true way and that joining the Quaker movement would be the end of their spiritual search and the beginning of their newly accessed spiritual growth. From the special closeness Friends felt in their reconciled relationship with God, God's call to care for the disadvantaged in the village communities and beyond issued. Special "concern" for a person or group that experienced suffering prompted many Friends to lead itinerant lives of service, mission and ministry.

Meetings for worship

Because meetings for business became an extension of meetings for worship it is useful to create a more precise picture of how meetings for worship unfolded. Detailed descriptions of early worship practices by participants are rare. One is found in the writings of a well known Quaker opponent and Cumberland clergyman by the name of Francis Higginson from 1653.[391] Responding to a pamphlet written by George Fox, entitled "Saul's Errand to Damascus", Higginson goes to some length to condemn and vilify Quaker beliefs and practices. The paragraph that concerns us, in which he deals with Quaker's worship practices is headed, *Of the wicked practices of Quakers and first of their meetings and speakings*. Under this title he records that Quakers meet either on Sundays or any day of the week, numbering between thirty and two hundred. He notes that meeting places varied from private homes to open areas. The main issue was to hold meetings away from the business of the township or crowded neighbourhoods. His loathing is obvious between the lines as he characterises the actual worship:

> [F]or the most part they use no prayer … When they do, their praying devotion is so quickly cooled …. They have no singing of psalms, hymns, or spiritual songs – that is an abomination. No reading or exposition of holy scripture … No teaching or preaching … No administration of sacraments … no talk … of such carnal things … They have only their own mode of speaking … which they do not call … preaching … If any of their chief speakers be among them, the rest give place to them; if absent,

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391   Adrian Davies alerted me to this text through a shorter quote in his book, *The Quakers in English Society 1655–1725*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000, 77.

any of them speak will pretend a revelation. Sometimes girls are vocal in their convent, while leading men are silent. Sometimes after they are congregated, there is (altum silentium) not a whisper among them for an hour or two or three together … They exceedingly affect night meetings, which are usually of both sexes very lately, and not infrequently continued all night long … [T]heir speaker for the most part uses the posture of standing, or sitting with his hat on, his countenance severe, his face downward, his eyes fixed mostly towards the earth, his hands and fingers expanded, continually striking gently on his breast.… His admiring auditors … believe [his words] to be the very words and dictates of Christ speaking in him.[392]

From this critical eyewitness account a style of worship is revealed that vacillates between lively speaking and deep silence, without setting any time limits for either. Men and women are equally permitted to contribute and utterings are understood to come directly from the mouth of Christ.

Meetings for Worship become quiet

Meetings for worship gradually lost their spontaneous, inspired flavour and became more and more quiet. "Dwelling deep" and "centring down" were the instructions by George Fox (1624–1691), one of the first generation leaders, to worship goers of the late 1650s and early 1660s.[393] A group of mature "Public Friends" travelled England sitting in meetings for worship to test the spontaneous inspirations against new standards. By 1666 the practice of worship and the experience of convincement had lost the agony of early threshing meetings. In the silence of the worshipping communion, transformation now arose entirely inwardly. Robert Barclay, a prominent Quaker theologian and apologist, was convinced during a worship meeting in his own house. From his description we learn how worship meetings had changed by then:

Many are the blessed experiences which I could relate of this silence and manner of worship … for as [it] consisteth not in words, so neither in silence, as silence; but in a holy dependence of the mind upon God from which … silence naturally follows

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392   Francis Higginson, *A Brief Relation of the Irreligion of the Northern Quakers,* 11, 12. Quoted in Hugh Barbour, Arthur O. Roberts, (eds.), *Early Quaker Writings 1650–1700.* Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973, 70–71.

393   See Barbour & Frost, *The Quakers,* 40.

until words can be brought forth which are from God's Spirit … And as everyone

is thus gathered … inwardly in their spirits as well as outwardly … though there be

not a word spoken, yet is the true spiritual worship performed … and our hearts …

overcome with the secret sense of God's power … without words … ministered from

one vessel to another.[394]

Fox radically departed from the reformed theology of his time in that he asserted the actual transformation of the old person into one reborn in Christ. Purity and holy living had come in reach for the ordinary human being through the experience of the inward Light. In his tenth letter written to Friends in 1652 Fox instructed his readers on the transforming power of the Light in simple terms:

Stand still in that which is pure, after ye see yourselves; and then mercy comes in.

After thou seest thy thoughts, and the temptations, do not think, but submit; and then

power comes. Stand still in that which shows and discovers; and there doth strength

immediately come. And stand still in the light, and submit to it and the other will

be hushed and gone; and then content comes. And when temptations and troubles

appear, sink down in that which is pure, and all will be hushed and fly away.[395]

Standing still in the light of an entire community amplified and energised its life changing power. After a period of much noisy proclamation silence took over the work of enthusiastic preaching. Silent worship created the opportunity for the work of the Spirit within, a work that was bound to spill over into outward action. Howard Brinton describes the work of the Spirit or the power of the Light in three functions:

[i]t affords knowledge of religious truth and moral values, it supplies power whereby

man [a person] derives strength to act on this knowledge, and it enables men [and

women] to achieve cooperation and unity among themselves. As source of truth it

gives guidance and particularly brings about awareness of sin and shortcoming; as

394   Quoted from Robert Barclay, *Apology* (1678) *Proposition XI*, iv and ix. In Barbour and Frost, *The Quakers*, 40.

395   *The Works of George Fox*, Volume VII, The Epistles Volume I, reprinted from the edition of 1831, Philadelphia and New York: First New Foundation Publication, 1990, 20.

source of power it enables weak, average human beings to do great things; as source of

unity it causes the whole meeting to act as one person.[396]

From this Spirit-induced expansion of Quaker converts and from the ashes of the decaying world a new life in the "Gospel-order" began to take shape. Sandra Cronk describes this new life as "first and foremost, life lived in God's transforming, guiding, and sustaining power … Only in Christ's life and power is there true freedom and liberty. The new Gospel-order related to three areas in Friends' life: "the inward life of worship and discernment, the interior functioning of the church-community (and the Quaker home which, in some ways, is seen as a smaller version of the meeting community) and the social testimonies of Friends". [397]

The spiritual life of a Friend could entail "openings" or "leadings". "Leadings" usually came with an impetus to act. A leading could turn into a concern. A concern had to be acted upon, because it was perceived as a call to action by the Spirit or power of God. However, the community still had to offer its spiritual and/or financial support for a concern to be put into action. An opening, on the other hand may have contained a spiritual truth or deep insight about oneself or the world that impacted on a person's attitude and understanding of God, self, the community or the world. Discerning the nature of a concern and the appropriate action in obedience to the Spirit's leading was one of the primary functions of a Friend's application of discernment which became enshrined in the clearness committees' work.[398]

The emergence of governmental structures

Meetings that dealt predominantly with governing issues had to develop procedures in keeping with the practices of life and faith. In the course of the first 20 years General Meetings were called for dealing with inquiries and resolving pressing social matters. They were known to draw

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396   Howard Brinton, *Guide to Quaker Practice*. Pendle Hill Pamphlet #20. Lebanon, Pennsylvania: Sowers Printing Company, 1973, tenth printing, 10–11.

397   Sandra L. Cronk. *Gospel Order. A Quaker Understanding of Faithful Church Community*. Pendle Hill Pamphlet #297. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1991, 9.

398   See for example *Some Guidelines for Clearness*. At: http://www.fgcquaker.org/sites/www.fgcquaker.org/files/attachments/ Guidelines%20for%20Clearness%20for%20a%20Leading%20or%20Ministry.pdf#overlay-context=resources/clearness-committees-what-they-are-and-what-they-do Accessed 2/10/2013.

a large attendance, especially when they were conducted by George Fox himself.[399] During such

meetings Fox would instruct the growing membership in a wide range of issues, such as keeping

their eyes on what truly mattered spiritually, to prevent becoming too preoccupied with worldly

business, "so that ye can hardly do anything to the service of God." He directed them to care for

the poor and the imprisoned, to be honest in their business dealings and to record their births

and deaths. As time went by, the conduct of Quakers during meetings required closer scrutiny,

especially when people fell asleep or rose to speak without apparent inspiration. Fox made sure

that admonishment and guidance were performed in a spirit of tenderness, "love and wisdom

that is pure and gentle from above."[400] As part of the formation of a more structured organisation,

individual leaders discerned the way forward and took the appropriate steps.

Pastoral epistles that were initially written to answer specific questions began to issue sets of

rules to solve recurring problems, such as setting regular meeting times, how to respond to

people who ceased to attend meetings, defining the criteria for rising and exercising vocal

ministry in a meeting for worship, instructing the members about collections for the poor, the

overall administration of collected funds, the proper process for marriages and the meticulous

recording of births, deaths and marriages.[401] The increase in administrative activity made it

more and more urgent to create structures that would allow the efficient implementation of

these tasks.

Over time an informal, caring style of addressing problems and making rules for the community

competed with a more legalistic thrust. In later years, the more inwardly directed Quakers were

oriented, the more concerned they became with maintaining a strong link to the past. The

more they sought to engage with the world around them through culture, art, literature, music,

science, politics, history and philosophy, the more tension they created with their conservative

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399   See William C. Braithwaite. *The Beginnings of Quakerism*. Second edition prepared by Henry J. Cadbury. York, England: William
        Sessions Limited, in association with the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, 1981, 309, where he paraphrases Fox's speeches at
        three General Meetings in Launceston.

400   Ibid., 310.

401   Ibid., 312–330.

counterparts. The conflict that arose from these tensions inevitably led to schisms,[402] or as Dandelion prefers to call it, to a "diversification" of Quakerism. The Great Evangelical Awakening had a further impact on the Quakers, as many Quakers joined the emerging Methodist congregations in Britain. However, there was also an influx of evangelical theology and biblical faith into the Quaker movement which was both compatible and incompatible with Quaker life and practice. The pietist and Wesleyan emphasis on conversion experience resonated strongly with the original role of inward experience. But in relation to the role of Christ as personal saviour and the authority of Scripture, conservative Quakers rejected the authority of the scriptures in favour of the sole authority of the inward Light. The evangelical awakening led to the emergence of a new type of Quakerism, the evangelical, Bible-centred Quakers.[403] A look back over the historic formation of the Quakers, shows a situation whereby universalist-inter-faith, liberal-Christian, evangelical and conservative Quakers have formed their own strands of Quakerism.[404] But despite significant theological differences, the process of decision making as 'Meeting for Worship for Business' has remained a common link among the diverse strands.

Meetings for Worship continue

To this day the meeting for worship takes place in every local meeting. This gathering is the place where the life of the Spirit is given room to move within and among the waiting members. The silence that ensues as Quakers sit in the Light and wait for the Spirit to move is at the most profound level a process of being gathered in which the gathered community collectively and personally enter into union with what they conceive as Divine presence.[405] It is a kind of

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402   See Rufus M. Jones, *The Later Periods of Quakerism.* London: MacMillan and Co, 1921, especially chapter XII, headed "The Great Separation." Jones notes that the eldership of the Quakers in America were unable to connect with the younger generations who, influenced by new rationalism, new scientific findings (Darwinism) and new moral codes lost their commitment to the spirituality of the traditional Quaker way. Jones says of the elders that they were "not wide awake to the new needs of the new time. The current thought had changed. New ideas were in the air. New questions were being asked, new interests were stirring. The old swaddling-clothes were too tight for the growing body, but the foster-guardians did not understand the signs of their time, were ignorant of the laws of growing minds and hoped fondly that Discipline, which had always worked like magic, would continue to work". 436.

403   See Heron, *Quakers in Britain*, 10–11; Dandelion, *An Introduction to Quakerism*, 102–103; and Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, 163–167.

404   See Dandelion, *An Introduction to Quakerism*, especially chapter 2.

405   The sacramental dimension of silence can be understood as an ultimate site for the human/divine encounter during which the Divine reveals itself to human beings, firstly as presence, but then also in words shared later in the vocal ministry. In this way, the community which sits in silent waiting "makes present the reality to which it points". See Catherine Mowry Lacugna, *God for Us, The Trinity & Christian Life.* San Francisco: HarperCollins Publisher, 1991, 402. Although no outward sacramental elements are used, the silence in which the divine/human encounter occurs is just as real as if there were such elements. See also Brinton, *Friends for 300 years*, 71. Here Brinton borrows the language of Rudolf Otto.

sacramental stillness and spiritual abiding in the Spirit or the Light of Christ, from which the move to outward expression or vocal ministry arises. It signifies the participation in the divine life virulent within the members of the community and mitigated by the human voice in human language. As Brinton puts it, "[w]orship brings us to the frontier of thought. Beyond the dim expanse, infinite and enfolded in mystery. There lies the source and destiny of our being."[406] The gathered silence and the rising for vocal ministry – these were and are the two pillars of Quaker worship.

Vocal ministry, or the rising in a worship meeting to share a divine prompting, over time leads to a culture of mutual accountability to test such promptings or leadings, both inside and outside of the context for worship. Such testing could occur as part of a personal encounter of leaders with one another or by mail. Because each individual was affirmed as a potential source of new revelation, personal promptings were taken rather seriously. In the early years, each person relied on her or his own sense of discernment. This situation, however, changed over time and criteria or "tests" for the authenticity of revelations were formulated.

Michael Sheeran lists four such tests for leadings or promptings that were applied in early Quaker meetings and in the exchange of written correspondence to verify the divine authenticity of a leading: the cross, the Scriptures, the submission of openings, the fruits of the Spirit and in later years, silence and unadorned speech.[407] The cross as test of a leading meant anything that went contrary to Friend's natural inclinations, i.e., anything that had be borne against one's will. This was a problematic interpretation, because it sometimes led to Friends' actions that were purely performed because they were utterly uncomfortable. Using Scripture as test required the application of the understanding of Scripture that was unique to the Quakers. Scripture was not understood as normative, the Inner Light was. But Scripture inspired the experiences brought about by the Inner Light. Submission of openings meant the willingness to hear other leaders' ideas about a leading and to be open to correction or endorsement by them. And finally, the fruits of the Spirit pointed to a sense of peace and unity. Where "soberness, stillness, quietness and strength" were visible, there was God. Where distractions, distempers,

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406   Brinton, *Friends for 300 Years*, 71–72.
407   Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule*, 24–30.

unruliness and confusion were present, the authenticity of divine leading was missing. In later meetings, abiding in silence and discerning "the still small voice" and a special style of simple speech were regarded as signs of inspiration.

In the first years of Fox's leadership his guidance was believed to be infallible by himself and his followers. "[H]is power of discernment reading of the inner Light, was the root of apostolic decision making,"[408] as Sheeran puts it. William Braithwaite critically notes that "this belief in infallible inspiration led to a forcefulness and also a mixture of unperceived error … confident preaching in the face of persecution but also intolerance, deprecation of the value of intellectual gifts" [409] and other judgements that reflected the very error in judgement they denied. The explicit claim of infallibility eventually faded out and discernment and judgement were subjected to the four fold test described above.

Meetings for Worship for Business

When Quaker numbers were swelling the need for organisational structures and administration led to the development of the unique procedure Quakers used to make decisions together, calling it 'Meeting for Worship for Business'. The person who leads the meetings was called the "clerk". His or her role was to preside over the meeting as well as to record all decision in "minutes". But more importantly,

> [e]very business meeting was concerned with knowing the mind of the Lord, and sought to guide its action by the weight of spiritual judgment rather than by mechanical counting of heads, or the rhetorical and argumentative skill of the speakers. "Friends", wrote Fox, "are not to meet like a company of people about town or parish business, neither in their men's or women's meetings, but to wait upon the Lord.[410]

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408 Ibid., 23.

409 William C. Braithwaite, *Spiritual Guidance in Quaker Experience.* London: Swarthmore Press, 1909, 40–41 and 55. Quoted in Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule,* 24.

410 Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism,* 341, quoted in Brayshaw, *The Quakers,* 168.

The rhythm that was typical for a meeting for worship, expressed in practices of silence and vocal ministry, extended to the business meetings, thus defining administrative tasks as spiritual practices. Fox explained this point further in one of his Epistles, addressing Friends

> to keep your meetings in the power of God, and in his wisdom (by which all things were made) and in the love of God, that by that ye may order all to his glory. And when Friends have finished their business, sit down and continue awhile quietly and wait upon the Lord to feel him. And go not beyond the Power, but keep in the Power by which God Almighty may be felt among you.[411]

Edward Burrough, another significant leader of the first generation, in a letter written in 1662 instructs Friends as follows:

> … being orderly come together, not to spend time with needless, unnecessary and fruitless discourses; but to proceed in the wisdom of God … not in the way of the world as a worldly assembly of men, by hot contests, by seeking to outspeak and overreach one another in discourse, as if it were … two sides violently striving for dominion in the way of carrying on some worldly interests for self-advantage; not deciding affairs by greater vote or the number of men, as the world who have not the wisdom, love and fellowship of God, in gravity, patience and meekness, in unity and concord, submitting to one another in lowliness of heart … in love, coolness, gentleness and dear unity.[412]

The fact that he had to spell out certain obstructive behaviours allows for the conclusion that he was seeking to curb existing behaviour of heated arguments, domination and majority voting by individuals or groups.

When an issue was brought before a meeting, it was first considered through silence and in light of all the information relevant to it. The key question in the minds of those present was, which way do we go? Patricia Loring recalls the classic Quaker vocabulary "of waiting for Way to Open, seeing where Way is Opening, following Way Opening. Implicit in this phrase is a sense

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411   George Fox, Epistle 162 from 1658 quoted in Brinton, *Friends for 300 years,* 106.
412   Edward Burrough, *Letters of Early Friends.* 305. In Brayshaw, *The Quakers,* 169.

of unfolding in and of time, in which we are called to take part by feeling, by being alive to, the movement and the way it draws us."[413]

The office of the "clerk" developed over time from a recording to a recording and presiding ministry. In 1733 Britain was divided into five districts and a minute stated that from then on, each district had to supply the clerk for the Yearly meeting in turn.[414] In his or her presiding function it fell into clerk's duties to determine the agenda, name issues, monitor the exchange of information, to suggest solutions, to bring the deliberations back on track or to pursue the completion of incomplete decisions. Overseeing the decision making process culminated in reading "the sense of the meeting" and formulating a minute at the conclusion of each deliberation that accurately captured the sense of the meeting. Voting for or against a proposal was abolished in Quaker decision making. In this sense it was, in Sheeran's terms, a "voteless" method of decision making.

Nothing has been written in early Quaker documents about the specific role of the clerk and the technical detail of Quaker decision making. But by guarding the ethos of the interactions around decision making and by embedding business deliberations tightly into the practice of worship, the leaders were satisfied that the integrity of doing business was maintained. In contemporary documents more has been written about the "sense of the meeting" and the role of the clerk as will be shown below.

Decision making practices in the various strands of Quakerism

The tradition of the Friends can be divided into two different styles of worship and organisational structure. These two styles have been incorporated in a variety of different strands of Quakerism. They are called the "unprogrammed" and the "programmed and/or pastoral tradition". Worship in the unprogrammed tradition refers to the practice of sitting in silence, waiting on God or a prompting by the Spirit which can result in spontaneous vocal ministry,

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413 Patricia Loring, *Listening Spirituality. Corporate Spiritual Practice Among Friends.* Volume II, Washington Grove, Maryland: Openings Press, 1999 and 2009, 69.

414 See Doncaster, *Quaker Organisation and Business Meetings,* 37.

as was discussed before. Conducting business and making decisions pertaining to the life of a community remain integrated in the unprogrammed tradition. The programmed or pastoral strand of Quakerism, originating in the Mid-west of America in the 1870s, 80s and 90s, came about through a revivalist style of preaching and giving testimonies resulting in a sudden increase of members in Quaker meetings, attendants who had not had any other "seasoning" in the Quaker ways.[415] Although British Quakers underwent the same doctrinal struggles as their American counterparts, they did not experience the birth of a new organisational strand of Quakerism, but instead found themselves under the dominance of evangelical Quakers for half a century. In the ensuing exploration of communal discernment in the Quaker tradition I will draw predominately from the proponents of the unprogrammed meeting tradition with an occasional reference to the programmed tradition.

Worship life and social practices of local, regional and yearly meetings in Britain, New Zealand and Australia are largely shaped by the unprogrammed tradition. The programmed tradition or pastoral system conducts worship with hymns, formal prayer and prepared sermons. It commissions pastors and elders for discipline, administration and pastoral oversight. But surprisingly, in terms of business meetings, both strands are committed to the same traditional structures. Both use the office of the clerk who remained the presider and recorder. Both strands remained committed to a decision making process that invites the involvement of all members and excludes voting. And both uphold the notion of communal spiritual discernment and impromptu leadings of the Spirit as part of their decision making process.

To illustrate this peculiar fact I will quote from a number of voices chosen from different versions of the "Book of Discipline" or the "Book of Quaker Faith and Practice" which provide the theological and practical framework for each Quaker strand. The degree of continuity in relation to the shape of decision making practices over 4 centuries, given the diversification of the Quaker movement, is remarkable.

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415   For further details see Punshon's account on the rise of the pastoral system, *Portrait in Grey*, 199–202.

Friend Eden Grace, member of the Beacon Hill Friends Meeting, Boston Massachusetts, New England Yearly Meeting and part of the Friends United Meeting[416] (FUM), introduced Quaker business practices to an ecumenical subcommittee in Damascus in March 2000 with these words:

> The first comment to make about Quaker business practice is that it is of central importance to Friends. It is rooted in our deepest theological affirmations, and is one of our highest spiritual experiences. To ask a Quaker to describe the Meeting for Business is to ask for a testimony of the core of our faith.[417]

What does this mean? Grace explains:

> A Quaker Meeting for Business is conducted in the context of worship, and with the same expectant waiting upon the Spirit as in the Meeting for Worship. The Business Meeting begins and ends with periods of open worship, and an atmosphere of reverence and devotion is maintained throughout the Meeting. Each contribution to the discussion is heard in a spirit of prayer. As the spiritual momentum grows and the movement of Christ is felt among us, we experience the Gathered Meeting, in which we are gathered into Unity with Christ and become of one heart and mind.[418]

The "expectant waiting upon the Spirit" of the "Gathered Meeting" whose members are brought into "Unity with Christ" and thus with one another – these are the central terms of evangelical Quaker ecclesiology and decision making practice. They permeate the business dealings, i.e. the communicative behaviour, relational attitudes, core values and foundational beliefs of this particular Quaker tradition that Eden Grace herself is part of. The New England Yearly Meeting is part of the 'Friends United Meeting', or FUM, a cluster of meetings which united in 1902.[419] FUM is the only strand within the diversity of Quaker traditions which has made the effort to

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416 Friends United Meeting or FUM was founded in 1902 as the result of efforts to reunite 3 separated and divided strands of Quakerism: liberal Quakers (Hicksites), orthodox or conservative Quakers (Wilburites) and evangelical Quakers (Gurneyites). On the nature of these divisions see the summary on American Quakerism.

417 Eden Grace, 'An Introduction to Quaker Business Practice.' Paper prepared for a subcommittee meeting of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches Damascus, Syria, March 2000. This paper is also published on the WCC web site as: http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/damascuspost-03-e.html Quoted here from http://www.edengrace.org/quakerbusiness.html Accessed 25/09/2007.

418 Ibid.

419 'Friends United Meeting' has gathered Yearly Meetings under its care from the programmed, semi-programmed and unprogrammed strands of Quakerism in its attempt to overcome schisms that had occurred in the late eighteen hundreds.

gather a mix of traditions from liberal, conservative/orthodox and evangelical backgrounds. It has a distinct evangelical flavour with its emphasis on the personal and corporate relationship with Christ and its high view of the authority of the Bible.

A different strand of evangelical Quakerism is incorporated as 'Evangelical Friends International' or EFI, formerly 'Evangelical Friends of America', or EFA. Evangelical Friends Churches are programmed and structured as pastoral systems. They have a strong affinity with other Protestant evangelical-conservative denominations, focus on evangelism, personal salvation and conversion through Christ who died on the cross for the sin of the world, church planting and a life of Christian witness. The Evangelical Friends Churches, however, do maintain a strong connection with Quakerism by maintaining the same "meeting for worship for business" practices.

The Handbook of Practice and Procedure of the Australian Quakers describes the relationship between worship and business like this:

> The Meeting for Worship is central to life in the Religious Society of Friends. We meet together in silence to worship God and to find true fellowship. We meet in silence because we believe that therein we may become aware of God's presence and that deep silence is a condition for religious experience. This silence enlarges the life of those present so that a communion of heart and mind is possible, a communion which achieves a unity based upon a respect for diversity. (Section 2/1)[420]

In keeping with early Quaker practice, worshipping in silence is the main pathway to an awareness of God's presence and an authentic connection with one another. However, the affirmation of the "communion of heart and mind" is accompanied by a qualification of that intimate connection based on "a respect for diversity". Seeking to strike a balance between unity and diversity and accept the implications of diversity is a hallmark of liberal Quakerism. *The Australian Handbook* points out that "religion and life are one" (section 2/1), which means that what happens in worship flows on into daily life and daily life is part of worship. The ordinary

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420   *The Handbook of Practice and Procedure of the Australian Quakers.* 6th edition.
         At http://www.quakers.org.au/associations/7464/files/Draft_Handbook_6th_Ed.pdf Accessed 25/11/2010.

life of a Quaker is a witness to her/his spiritual life. The phrase "Let your life speak" is a classical Quaker term that points to the significance of practically lived testimony for what is opened and experienced in worship. The integrity of a Quaker's life depends entirely on the unity between spiritual experience and lived practice both of which originate in the silent waiting on God. In this vein *The Australian Handbook* asserts that "[t]he Meeting for Worship sets a standard for the whole week and its influence will be felt in the private and public lives of members" (Section 2/1).

The way in which business meetings are conducted refers to the same flow-on effect and to that very unity between spirituality and daily life. *The Australian Handbook* suggests that

> Friends meet to conduct the business of the Society in a spirit of worship, seeking the will of God in the matters before them, holding that every activity is subject to the Divine will (Section 2/2).

From the unity of life and worship which results in the unity in fellowship, follows a way of dealing with business that reflects that same unity. Silence is the medium in which Quaker worship is conducted. However, it is not silence in and of itself that brings about unity, but silence that makes room for the work of the Spirit of God. Whilst in the deep quiet of silent worship the work of God's Spirit may be felt, in "vocal ministry" it becomes audible and tangible. During "vocal ministry", a person rises from her/his seat and addresses the worshipping community. This is how *The Australian Handbook* introduces such practice:

> During the Meeting someone may be moved to speak, either in prayer or ministry or perhaps in song. Such ministry, arising from a 'gathered' Meeting does not interrupt the silence but rather seems to grow from it … Friends' worship depends upon the leading of God's spirit and the spontaneous response of those present and for this reason each individual takes part whether that response is vocal or silent (Section 2/1).

Worshipful speaking as an expression of the movement of God's Spirit equally calls for worshipful listening. Because of the interconnection of speaking from a deep place and listening with deep attention, the movement of worship unfolds between the expectant and gathered

inward focus and its outward manifestations, in the release of inspired speech and in the worshipful waiting for and reception of such speech. The same sacred interactions are to be enacted the Meeting for Business:

> In a business meeting … Friends seek the right decision under God's guidance … The emphasis is on worshipful listening and sharing through which the leadings of the Spirit in relation to the matter before the meeting may be discerned … True leadings are reached when there is a unity of spirit regardless of difference in attitude and ideas (Section 2/2).

When each present member applies her/himself to detecting/discerning the leading of the Spirit as primary task during any act of speaking and listening, arriving at "the right decision under God's guidance" comes in reach. A "right decision" is achieved when a "true leading" is perceived which is possible under the condition of "unity of spirit". This unity is not to eliminate differences in attitudes and ideas, but somehow to supersede, bypass or perhaps even transcend them (see Part II/10). How this occurs without in fact suppressing or subtly marginalising different and uncomfortable views will have to be seen. For the time being it is necessary to be content with the notion that the "unity of spirit" here spoken of is not identical with an agreement with one another's opinions.

The British edition of *Quaker Faith and Practice*[421] has served as an authoritative source for Quaker meetings all over the world for the best part of the past 300 years. Then called *The Book of Discipline* it provided guidance and direction for a vast diversity of Quaker meetings. It changed in language and emphasis over the centuries, depending on which strand of Quakerism dominated the London Yearly Meeting. It can, therefore, be understood as the precursor to many Quaker Handbooks. I note that it, too, strongly emphasises the integration of worship and business practices, but it does so in its own distinctive terminology. In a series of selected testimonies, advices and admonishments, stretching over 350 years, it elaborates on the intersection of the two realms. The following excerpts will provide some insight. The following statement relates to worship:

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421 *Quaker Faith and Practice.* At http://quakersfp.live.poptech.coop/qfp/contents.html Accessed 21/09/2007.

> In worship we have our neighbours to right and left, before and behind, yet the Eternal Presence is over all and beneath all. Worship does not consist in achieving a mental state of concentrated isolation from one's fellows. But in the depth of common worship it is as if we found our separate lives were all one life, within whom we live and move and have our being.[422]

When depicting Friends sitting in the wooden pews and chairs of the traditional meeting houses, Kelly's words conjure up images of that mysterious process of the gathering up of the many into the same place of silent waiting. The themes of unity or communion with the Divine and with one another resurface. Communion with the Divine is to coincide with the state of communion with others present. The allusion to Paul's famous words spoken at the Areopagus in Acts 17:28 points to the personal quality of that unity. They imply that the separate lives of the individual worshippers by virtue of their participation in silence enter into the one life of Christ which awaits them in the midst of that silence. Hence a 'gathered meeting' does not simply refer to the presence of individuals sitting together in a room without speaking. It is a meeting of united or connected members. The unity which emerges in this way has not been fabricated by human words or shared opinions, it is a fruit of the subtle work of the Spirit. This is not to be confused with silent meditation practices which might simply aim for the centring of a person's attention or a quieting down of her/his mind and body. John Punshon elaborates on this difference:

> Friends have never regarded [worship] as an individual activity. People who regard Friends' meetings as opportunities for meditation have failed to appreciate this corporate aspect. The waiting and listening are activities in which everybody is engaged … So the waiting and listening is incorporated also.[423]

From the point when a person takes her/his seat to the point of being 'gathered' a spiritual, that is, invisible movement occurs. The shared waiting in silence, the agreed abstinence from all interference and activity, without any particularly noticeable outward sign, opens the door for communion with one another and with the Divine. A group of individuals is formed into a body

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422   See Thomas R. Kelly, 1938, ibid., section 2.36. At http://quakersfp.live.poptech.coop/qfp/contents.html Accessed 21/09/2007.

423   See John Punshon in *Quaker Faith and Practice*, section 2.37. At: http://quakersfp.live.poptech.coop/qfp/contents.html Accessed 21/09/2007.

of persons-in-relation, perhaps at times even persons-in-communion. The meeting that deals with church business is not to be divorced from this experience of worship but it is permeated and enveloped by it. On this point the British *Quaker Faith and Practice* states:

> We see our meetings for church affairs not as business meetings preceded by a period of worship, but as 'meetings for worship for business'. Ideally the sacred and the secular are interwoven into one piece. Believing that all our business is brought before God for guidance we deprecate all that may foster a party spirit or confrontation. We therefore seek for a spirit of unity in all our decision making (London Yearly Meeting, 1986 section 2.88) … In all our meetings for church affairs we need to listen together to the Holy Spirit. We are not seeking a consensus; we are seeking the will of God. The unity of the meeting lies more in the unity of the search than in the decision which is reached. We must not be distressed if our listening involves waiting, perhaps in confusion, until we feel clear what God wants done.[424]

By calling a business meeting "a meeting for worship for business" it is made clear that worship is neither a prelude nor an appendix to business; it is its foundation, its framework, its continuous undercurrent, or, perhaps more importantly, the current to which all members set their course. The turn of phrase "Seeking the spirit of unity" recognises that at times the experience of unity can be out of sight. Yet, finding unity in decision making is always the overarching agenda.

The heart of Quaker discernment: The Sense of the Meeting

The notion that Quaker decision making is the same as seeking consensus is frequently rejected. In the pamphlet, entitled *Beyond Consensus*, Barry Morley argues the case for "the sense of the meeting" as pivotal outcome of a decision in distinction to arriving at "consensus".[425] He launches into a passionate polemic against consensus as a modernised and degenerated version of "sense of the meeting". In his view, the two are qualitatively different in practice and meaning. He quotes various Friends who comment on the difference between the two:

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424 See London Yearly Meeting, *Quaker Faith and Practice.* 1984 section 2.89 http://quakersfp.live.poptech.coop/qfp/contents.html Accessed 21/09/2007.

425 Barry Morley, *Beyond Consensus. Salvaging Sense of the Meeting.* Pendle Hill #307. Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Publications, 1993.

Consensus is an outward process in which a vote is taken without saying either yea or nay. It involves listening to all concerns, and then, through a negotiation process, finding the best solution. Sense of the meeting hears all of the concerns then moves beyond the verbal expressions to hear the spirit of the concern in order to discern what is 'right' for the group.[426]

The main issue of this differentiation is with the instrumental nature of "consensus". It is some sort of technical process designed to get to a decision. Or, as Morley puts it,

[t]he purpose of consensus is to produce a product. It is aimed at a decision. The pursuit of the sense of the meeting involves nurturing a process which is completed when God's recognizable presence settles over us in silence … Consensus involves a process in which we promulgate, argue, and select or compromise ideas until we can arrive at an acceptable decision. When we seek the sense of the meeting, the decision is a by-product. It happens along the way. The purpose of seeking the sense of the meeting is to gather ourselves in unity in the presence of Light.[427]

Pitching the technical aspects of arriving at a consensus against the spiritual process of allowing for the "sense of the meeting" to emerge from a spiritual communion sharpens the point, even if in reality, this juxtaposition might collapse when the clerk exercises the highly developed skill to formulate 'a minute' which reflects an amenable compromise. The point Morley is making, however, relates to the origin of data collection, discussion and final outcome. For Morley there is no doubt that all aspects of decision making have to originate in the gathered meeting whose formation occurs during silent worship. Such decision making process gains its efficiency more through "receiving" and "surrendering" than through willing and doing. Morley argues,

When we seek the sense of the meeting we allow ourselves to be directed to the solution that awaits us. It is a process of surrender to our highest natures, and a recognition that, …, there is only light. At the end of the process we reside in that Light. We have

426 Ibid., 5–6.
427 Ibid., 15.

allowed ourselves to be led to a transcendent place of unmistakable harmony, peace and tender love.[428]

The active/passive dichotomy possibly captures the guiding force of the meeting more accurately than the technical/spiritual opposition. There is a theological slant on Morley's argument which underlines the importance of this kind of proceeding, showing a practical and concrete affinity with something of an eschatological expectation. It is eschatological in that it involves faith in the completion of a process that has the unity or communion of the gathered community as its *telos*. Reaching towards the aim of unity in faith and hope in spite of debates that show evidence to the contrary, brings the aim as a possibility into reach without manipulating or forcing it into being. The actual result that arises from an embodied unity cannot be manufactured. There is no place for a functional unity or a merely tolerated diversity without unity. The unity that is tangible when that 'sense of the meeting' has manifested is unequivocal, transformative and accessible to everyone. It is not simply a relief that "it is over", however contentious the "it" may have been. It is an arrival of a whole community in a new place of communion, both with one another and the Spirit, that is felt as a gift rather than an achievement, a grace rather than a work. Strangely, it is most clearly sensed in the silence that befalls the gathered community upon the resolution of a difficult issue. Morley concedes that this kind of spiritual solution requires a willingness "to lay aside personal needs and grievances … When I am able to set my ideas aside, and you are able to set your ideas aside, doors are opened which allow solutions to enter on a shaft of Light."[429] In arriving at a sense of the meeting together the crux of the matter lies precisely in participants' willingness and ability to do so.

Morley suggests the adaptation of certain attitudes and perspectives to ensure the process, proposing three "components" in overcoming disagreement: release, long Focus, and transition to Light.[430] Morley argues for the release of the emotional dimension of a disagreement. The meeting has to be a safe place for release. "Tears, harsh words, raised or shaking voices, difficulty with articulation – any of these might accompany release. Friends who release their feelings

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428 Ibid., 12.

429 Ibid., 13.

430 Ibid., 16–20.

should be listened to lovingly. No effort should be made to intervene – to correct, argue, analyze, criticize, clarify, or explain away.[431] Release … is part of the process which enables us to arrive together in the silence of Light accepted. By emptying themselves of anguish, anxiety, fear, anger, perhaps even joy, Friends open their minds for the inpouring of Light." We need to remember that the invitation towards emotional catharsis, although not common practice in contemporary decision making arenas, is well in keeping with early Quaker practice.

For his second point, long focus, Morley points out that "[t]he sense of the meeting is the *object* of business meeting. Thus we should focus our attention beyond the immediate discussion *toward* the sense of the meeting." Morley admits, that for a person who has an investment in an issue the focus is shortened, a circumstance which can seriously "interfere with progression toward Light."[432] Morley uses the snippet from a conversation during a baseball game to illustrate the point of gaining a long focus regardless of one's investment. The conversation revolved around the discovery that when Morley rests his sight on a tree a little above the playing field, he was able to see the whole field, rather than having only the performance of one player in focus. He comments: "By focusing on something in the distance you can see more, even though everything closer is a little out of focus."[433] Applying the metaphor to the Quaker meeting he imagines that "[e]xperienced Friends who treasure sense of the meeting stand on an inward high place and look beyond the ideas being discussed. From this vantage point ideas lose the sharp edge of immediacy." When clarity does not arise, a decision may be delayed or given over to silence.

To illustrate the third component, named "transition into the Light", Morley shares the story of a business meeting which received a letter from a *Peace and Social Concerns Committee* addressed to Friends of Whittier Meeting, the meeting in which Richard Nixon was a member. The letter

> described Quaker distress and embarrassment over Nixon's membership in the
> Religious Society of Friends and urged Whittier Friends to read him out of their

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431   Ibid., 16.

432   Ibid., 17.

433   Ibid., 18.

meeting. The floodgates of release broke open. Dramatic excoriations of Nixon intermingled with accolades for the committee in taking so forthright, difficult, and courageous a stand. These were followed by angry disclaimants who castigated the meeting for its appalling short sightedness in not recognizing the greatness of the embattled president. Excoriaters shook and disclaimers quaked. Before asking to be recognized, Elizabeth Haviland, a diminutive Friend of enormous stature, allowed the energy of indignation to wane. She spoke softly. No one could remember her ever speaking otherwise. "I had hoped that Friends had reached a place where they no longer read people out of meeting," she said. Focus had lengthened. Before long the meeting instructed the Committee on Peace and Social Concerns to draft an epistle expressing our hope that any pressures Whittier Meeting might be feeling during this difficult time were not overwhelming. Further, Sandy Spring offered its assistance if Whittier felt we could help them in anyway. Who, at the outset, would have dreamed that we would be led to that resolution? Awe was in silence that followed.[434]

The story reiterates the three points. The need for venting and emotional release is followed by a lengthening, that is widening of focus which opened the way for a transition into the Light. The sense of the meeting thus signifies a solution which could not have been fabricated by means of more discussion or negotiation. The turning point towards "way opening" was not activated by a forceful human action but by a quiet reminder of Quakers' deepest commitment to inclusivity, even of a rather derailed human being.

The story illustrates another important aspect of decision making in the Quaker tradition, namely the deliberate disowning of being the cause of the sense of the meeting. Morley observes that

> [o]ften the person through whom the idea came cannot remember. We sense that the sense of the meeting came through us and for us, but not from us. We are amazed that it works – exactly as it's supposed to be. Over and over we are amazed; it is appropriate that awe and transformation coexist.[435]

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434 Ibid., 20–21.

435 Ibid., 24.

The transformative power of the "sense of the meeting" extends not only to the solution of a particular issue but to the meeting as a whole. Morley describes that

> [t]hrough the process by which Quakers attain the sense of the meeting, transformation occurs. We are changed. We feel, in a literal way, the loving Presence which hovers over us. It manifests in the love we have for one another. We form invisible bonds among ourselves which transcend the petty and make the next sense of the meeting more desirable and more readily attainable.[436]

As I have pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, the deep silence of the meeting for worship was identified as carrying a sacramental quality. Morely attaches similar quality to the emergence of the "sense of the meeting". He claims, "[w]hether we wish to admit it or not, the sense of the meeting is a Quaker equivalent of Communion. We absorb and are absorbed by Light. We reach, if only momentarily, that place beyond time where we taste tranquility … We are immersed in a mystical moment even though we might not consider ourselves mystics. We take to ourselves the gift of experimental faith which the early Friends promised us. And we make decisions which feel good to us long after they cease to be germane. For a Faith that eschews outward ritual, the Quakers possess a powerful one; and it works. In this way, … [t]he process through which Quakers reach the sense of the meeting transforms hearts, disarms minds, and feeds the spirit."[437]

Although Morely's exposition of the heart of Quakers' decision meeting, the "sense of the meeting" has deep roots in the history and practice of the Quakers, he is aware of the fact that the unwavering commitment to this outcome is fading from Quaker practice. He realises that solutions arising from such spiritual reality are becoming the exception. Michael Sheeran adds, that there are times when the sense of the meeting does not manifest at all and disunity prevails requiring the construction of a compromise or consensus.[438] In comparison with voting systems, the Quaker method often appears time consuming and full of opportunities to avoid action. But in distinction to Morley, Sheeran asserts an approach to emotions that does not invite

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436   Ibid., 24.
437   Ibid., 24–25.
438   See Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule*, 53–61.

catharsis but restraint. Focusing on simplicity in rhetoric and emotional expression he suggests "a special effort at self-restraint" and quotes Brinton who regards "[e]loquence which appeals to emotion" as "out of place … Opinions should always be expressed humbly and tentatively in the realization that no one person sees the whole truth and that the whole meeting can see more of Truth than can any part of it".[439] In light of the growing reality of disunity in Quaker meetings, a list of options has been collated:

1.   unanimous decisions – no voting;

2.   silent periods – at start of meeting and when conflict arises;

3.   moratorium – when agreement cannot be reached;

4.   participation by all with ideas on the subject;

5.   learning to listen – not going to meeting with mind made up;

6.   absence of leaders – the clerk steers but does not dominate;

7.   nobody outranks anybody;

8.   factual-focus – emotions kept to a minimum; and

9.   small meetings – typically limited in number.[440]

There are other positions that Quakers who disagree may take: 1. disagreement but willingness to stand aside; 2. the request to be minuted by name as opposed; 3. a person can express the view that s/he is unable to unite with a proposal; and 4. a person may absent themselves from the decision.[441]

There is a story which illustrates the unique transformative moment, from dispute to resolution in the Quaker tradition. Although it does not claim to be based on historic fact, it uniquely demonstrates Quakers' application of communal discernment in its business practices. It is recorded in *This we can say*, the Australian book of Quaker faith and practice. Under the heading "Meeting for Worship for Business", Roger Walmsley 1996 offers the following fictitious anecdote illustrating a typical segment of a business meeting, sketching the character of contributions and the role of the clerk (Section 2.39):

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439   Howard Brinton, *Reaching Decisions: The Quaker Method*. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 17. Quoted in Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule*, 56.

440   Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule*, 51, quoted from Stuart Chase, *Roads to Agreement*. New York: Harper, 1951, 51–52.

441   Ibid, summarised from 65–70.

The failure of the potato crops in mid-nineteenth century Ireland not only led to starvation and the deaths of a million people, but it also left a devastated economy long after the food supply had recovered. Since Quakers are ordinary people, answering to that of God is not always easy. As the extent of the disaster in 1846 became evident, Dublin Quakers must have struggled to decide what, if anything, they could do. I have no idea what was said in those meetings … but if they resembled us it might have gone something like this: Silence … Friend Joseph rises and says, "I have a concern. I feel called to organise a committee to import thousands of tons of corn and distribute it to the hungry. To answer this call I need the support of Friends in this meeting." Silence … Another person rises and says, "We have not yet found a way to pay for cushions to cover these hard benches." Silence … A third rises and says, "And we adopted a minute to do that three years ago." Silence … A fourth and very experienced Friend rises and says, "We were not even able to pay our quota to Yearly Meeting last year. The notion that we can feed a million people, dear Friends, is misguided." A very long and prayerful silence ensues. Some heads bow. Others turn to gaze out the windows. An occasional sigh stirs the air. Then, a feeling of conviction begins to gather in the room until at long last, the clerk speaks and says, "I offer you a minute which I hope captures the sense of the meeting. It reads as follows: 'The meeting supports the concern brought by Friend Joseph to constitute a Central Relief Committee. Its membership shall be open and it will convene at the rise of this meeting.' Do Friends agree?" Slowly, wearily, around the room heads begin to nod assent and murmurs are heard saying, 'I hope it will be done.'[442]

This little fictional narrative contains the important elements of Quaker decision making. A difficult issue requires a decision. Different voices are being heard. A dead end is reached. The clerk "administers" silence. As the gathered community sits in the Light it is brought to a new place of unity and "way opens". In spite of the shortage of resources compassionate action

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442 *This we can say*. Australian Quaker Life, Faith and Thought. Australia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) Inc. Canberra: Millennium Print, 2003, 88–89.

becomes inevitable, whatever the sacrifices. This reality is actualised in the spirits and minds of all members as they sit in the Light in silence and allow it to do its work.

Pulling together the threads

In this chapter I have described the discernment and decision making practices of the Quakers including some of their historic origins. Sitting in silence, letting the Light of Christ gather the community to a place of unity, allowing 'that of God in everyone' to overcome obstacles and divisions in decision making, are the key features of this kind of discernment. The seamless integration of worship and decision making creates a foundation not only for constructive meetings, but also for daily life decisions grounded in the spirit of worship. Silence as the sacramental space where Christ or God meet's the people is the source of all guidance and decision making. The use of silence in business meetings, when appropriately administered by the clerk, calls a divided membership back to the source of its life. By returning to and sitting in the light, barriers seem to disappear without further fighting. Time spent in silence, waiting on the direction of the Spirit, with sighs too deep for words, makes space for the emergence of a united collective mind of the meeting. The significance of this spiritual practice and its uncanny and unforced transformative thrust is the gift and the challenge Quakers offer to the communal discernment practices of the whole Church Catholic.

Chapter 10. Communal discernment as consensus building

In this chapter I will explore a model of decision making that is based on a consensus procedure. It is interesting to note that in some instances a discerned outcome and 'consensus' are used interchangeably. However, as Friend Barry Morley insisted, consensus procedures are different from spiritually discerning 'the sense of the meeting'. To put it crudely, the sense of the meeting emerges from the proper balance of discussion, considering data and sitting in the Light. Consensus, as I will show in this chapter, emerges from negotiating the kind of compromises that have the highest level of community support. Consensus procedures are included in this investigation despite the fact that they are not using spiritual practices to achieve a decision. However, this chapter is included because it will provide a backdrop for the next chapter on the Uniting Church's *Manual for Meetings*.

Community development and grassroots peace movements have built into their ethos a commitment to high levels of participation and, where possible, reaching consensus in their decision making. The word "consensus" has two common meanings:

> One is a general agreement among the members of a given group or community, each of which exercises some discretion in decision making and follow-up action. The other is as a theory and practice of getting such agreements.[443]

Thus "consensus" refers to an outcome and a process in the same way as discernment does. "Consensus decision making" refers to a group process of coming to an agreement for action(s) "that not only seeks the agreement of most participants, but also the resolution or mitigation of minority objections."[444]

The importance of giving minorities a voice in relation to a final outcome is a key agenda of the consensus process. It aims to craft a compromise between diverging positions behind

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443   Article 'consensus'. At http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Consensus Accessed 29/12/2010.

444   Article 'consensus decision making'. At http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/consensus+decision+making Accessed 29/12/2010.

which each and every participant or faction can unite. Hence the value of an outcome arrived at through a consensus process lies in its support by the entire deciding community. An action backed by a real consensus has a much greater chance of being successfully implemented than an action that has been pushed through by only a few or one decided by majority voting.

On the website of the Civil Disobedience movement "Act Up", we find the following definition of consensus as a process:

> It is a method by which an entire group of people can come to an agreement. The input and ideas of all participants are gathered and synthesized to arrive at a final decision acceptable to all. Through consensus, we are not only working to achieve better solutions, but also to promote the growth of community and trust.[445]

The use of the terms "growth" and "trust" suggests that consensus is not merely a formal process but that it also facilitates an emotional connection among the participants, pointing back to the ancient Latin meaning rooted in con-sentire, having a shared sense or feeling.[446]

Mary McGhee in her article on 'Consensus Decision Making' published on the website of the Alberta Public Interest Research Group[447] describes consensus both as outcome and process in the following way:

> In simple terms, consensus refers to agreement on some decision by all members of a group, rather than a majority or a select group of representatives … Consensus is based on the belief that each person has some part of the truth and that no one has all of it (no matter how tempting it is to believe that we ourselves *really* know best!) It is also based on a respect for all persons involved in the decision being considered.

The reason for the high value attributed to participation is the assumption that "each person has some part of the truth." Each person presents a resource and is a potential contributor to the solution to any problem. The high value placed on the individual's contribution is paralleled

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445 http://www.actupny.org/documents/CDdocuments/Consensus.html Accessed 29/12/2010.

446 See also http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consensus Accessed 29/12/2010.

447 Mary McGhee, 'Consensus Decision Making'. Alberta Public Research Interest Group. At: http://www.apirg.org/downloads/formsold/consensus.pdf Mary McGhee, 'Consensus Decision Making.' Which is linked to the website of "Tools for Organizers, Activists, Educators and other Hell-Raisers." At: http://www.casagordita.com/tools.htm Accessed 30/12/2010.

by the high value attributed to an outcome that is carried by all. Thus the importance of the community and the importance of the individual are held in a delicate balance. It is important to remember that consensus is for the sake of the power of joint action, not for its own sake. The more support an action receives, the more powerful or effective its thrust towards change.

The commitment to a consensus driven decision making process was initially promoted by activist groups for the environment, which eventually formed the political party, *The Greens*. In the constitution of *The Greens* there is a decision making ethos that is striving for "grassroots participatory democracy and consensus. As far as possible, decisions are made by as many of the members as possible."[448] Another set of activist groups that practiced consensus from the late seventies through the eighties focused on community development consisted in initiatives committed to fighting poverty from a grassroots level.[449]

In 1987 C.T. Lawrence Butler wrote a book entitled *On Conflict and Consensus*, whose full text is published online as part of "The Formal Consensus Website."[450] Butler's work is linked to the "Food Not Bombs" network, again a grassroots peace movement whose agenda is to end world hunger by cooking for and feeding the hungry and poor in every nation, followed by the creation of caring communities. The other agenda of "Food Not Bombs" relates to advocating for a sustainable environment.[451] Butler developed a simple illustration of a model of the consensus decision making process which shows the flow of information, discussion and decision making on Flow Chart 1 below.[452] Butler's explanation of the flow chart is based on the conviction that "Formal Consensus" requires "a clearly defined structure … [and] a commitment to active cooperation, disciplined speaking and listening, and respect for the contributions of every

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448 http://wa.greens.org.au/process Accessed 29/12/2010. See also the Constitution of the Greens: http://greens.org.au/system/files/AG%20Constitution%20%5Bas%20amended%20Nov%202009%5D.pdf Accessed 28/12/2010, especially Chapter 4: Meetings: Procedures and Decision Making, para 36.1: "Decisions at all meetings of The Greens will be made primarily by consensus and a serious attempt at all times will be made towards achieving consensus. Sufficient time will be allowed for discussion of different views, including provision for non decision making meetings." 23.

449 See Anne Hope and Sally Timmel, *Training for Transformation. A Handbook for Community Workers*. Book 1, 2 and 3. Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1984. See especially Book 2, chapters 6. Leadership, 7. Decision Making by Consensus and 8. Evaluation. 47–129. This South African model of community development combines educational and leadership theories with a variety of training and reflection exercises, aiming for maximum empowerment through participation and the creation of sustaining living conditions. Consensus decision making is discussed 101ff.

450 The table of content can be found at http://www.consensus.net/ocaccontents.html. The text of the booklet is also available at http://www.ic.org/pnp/ocac/ For some biographical data on Butler see http://www.consensus.net/bio.html Accessed at 29/12/2010.

451 See http://www.foodnotbombs.net/ Accessed 29/12/2010.

452 At: http://www.consensus.net/ocac2.html Accessed 29/12/2010.

member. Likewise, every person has the responsibility to actively participate as a creative individual within the structure."[453] A clear structure which enables the accomplishment of decision by consensus calls for each person present to fully participate in the decision making process. It begins with the explanation of the process, followed by the introduction of a proposal or an issue for discussion. There are three levels of deliberation: Level 1: Broad open discussion, involving as many voices as possible; Level 2: Identify Concerns, requiring the careful listing and discussion of all concerns and objections, both personal and group related; and Level 3: Resolve Concerns, at which point concern is either ascertained, the issue is delegated to a committee or is blocked.

The facilitator of the consensus process has to prevent the meeting from becoming bogged down by particular concerns, dominating personalities or time consuming distractions. Frequent rotation of facilitators or even co-facilitating a meeting is recommended.[454] Not only does the facilitator need to carefully track each agenda item and its related ramifications and concerns, but she or he has to be familiar with the overall process and oversee how productively a discussion is flowing, intervene by streamlining, when necessary, clarify or simplify the proceedings and bring them to the resolution stage.

The reality of conflict

Butler embraces the necessity of conflict as part of the consensus process. His underlying assumption is

> that nonviolent conflict is necessary and desirable. It provides the *motivations* for improvement … Do not avoid or repress conflict. Create an environment in which disagreement can be expressed without fear. Objections and criticisms can be heard not as attacks, not as attempts to defeat a proposal, but as a concern which, when resolved, will make the proposal stronger.[455]

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453 http://www.consensus.net/ocac1.html Accessed 29/12/2010.
454 http://www.consensus.net/ocac5.html Accessed 29/12/2010.
455 http://www.consensus.net/ocac3.html Accessed 30/12/2010.

The positive affirmation of the reality of conflict, that is disagreement, opposing views and tension frees up the attention of the meeting for naming and working through the issues rather than resisting or denying one another's differences. It also acknowledges the real possibility that consensus cannot be reached, in which case other options need to be taken up. For such a scenario three choices become available: A person or group is asked *to stand aside* from blocking a decision while it is recognised that unresolved concerns exist that will warrant further attention. The second option consists in *sending an issue to a committee* for further deliberation. The third option entails the facilitator *declaring a block*, which means that the decision is not taken.

Supportive roles in consensus procedures

Apart from the facilitator, there are further roles to ensure the smooth and caring conduct of the consensus procedures. A public scribe will note on white boards or large sheets of paper the options and concerns formulated by those present as a way of mapping and tracking the discussion for the plenum. Then there is the role of the "peacekeeper" which is a unique way of relieving the facilitator from handling difficult participants. Butler characterises her or his role as follows:

> The role of peacekeeper is most useful in large groups or when very touchy, controversial topics are being discussed … This person is selected without discussion by all present at the beginning of the meeting. … This task entails paying attention to the overall mood or tone of the meeting. When tensions increase dramatically and angers flare out of control, the peacekeeper interrupts briefly to remind the group of its common goals and commitment to cooperation. The most common way to accomplish this is a call for a few moments of silence.[456]

Allowing the peacekeeper to manage difficult emotional situations during the meeting frees up the facilitator to concentrate on the content of the issues at hand. Another role supports the facilitator in this endeavour, namely the role of the "advocate". Her or his role looks as follows:

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456 http://www.consensus.net/ocac5.html Accessed 29/12/2010.

> Like the peacekeeper, advocates are selected without discussion at the beginning of
> the meeting. If, because of strong emotions, someone is unable to be understood, the
> advocate is called upon to help. The advocate would interrupt the meeting, and invite
> the individual to literally step outside the meeting for some one-on-one discussion
> … The intent here is the presentation of the concern by the advocate rather than the
> upset person so the other group members might hear it without the emotional charge.
> This procedure is a last resort, to be used only when emotions are out of control and
> the person feels unable to successfully express an idea.[457]

Butler's approach to consensus decision making (see Flow Chart 1) not only articulates a transparent process of participation but also recognises the role of emotions or difficult moments of relating during meetings when matters that carry a lot of charge are dealt with. The fact that these realities are acknowledged and addressed with adequate practical care opens the door to the very qualities of "growth" and "trust" that were mentioned above as hallmarks of a consensus process.

The Abilene paradox

A point of criticism with regard to the achievement of consensus relates to the so called "Abilene paradox." [458] The Abilene paradox refers to the peculiar possibility that a consensus can be achieved, but it turns out to be unreal. Unspoken expectations, the desire to please others, the need to be liked, to be seen as supportive by others, the fear of rejection and the fear to "rock the boat" can create a convincing illusion of a consensus, which remains just that, an illusion. The Abilene paradox resembles what Scott Peck called "pseudo community", a state of relating in which persons pretend to be a harmonious community "by being extremely pleasant with one another and avoiding all disagreement." [459] Peck explains that the essential dynamic of pseudo community is "conflict-avoidance" by "withholding some of the truth about themselves"

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457 Ibid.

458 http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Abilene+paradox Accessed 30/12/2010.

459 M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum. Creation of True Community – the First Step to World Peace.* London: Arrow Books, 1987, 86.

by "ignoring individual differences."[460] This danger of false consensus can be effectively counteracted by the encouragement of conflict as shown by Butler above. Or, as Peck puts it, "[p]seudocommunity is conflict-avoiding; true community is conflict-resolving."[461] Inviting persons to speak their mind early has the power to break the unspoken social-emotional bonds before they turn into "false action".

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460   Ibid., 88.
461   Ibid., 88.

Introductions

Clarify Process
Present Proposal or Issue
Questions to Clarify Presentation

Level 1

Broad Open discussion

Group Discussion
Call for Consensus
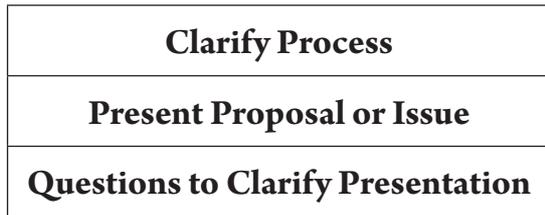
Level 2

Identify Concerns

List Any Concerns
Group Related Concerns

Level 3

Resolve Concerns

Resolve Group Concerns
Call for Consensus

Restate Remaining Concerns
Questions to Clarify Concerns
Discussion Limited to Resolving One Concern at a Time
Call for Consensus

The Formal Consensus Process

www.consensus.net

Consensus

Alternative Closing Options

Stand Aside

Send to Committee

Declare Block

Flow Chart 1

Pulling together the threads

In this chapter I have introduced the language of consensus which is one of participation, community building and commitment to a compromise for the sake of unified action for social change. Conflict is not avoided but is an assumed reality in decision making, no matter how noble the agenda. Discernment is not sought from spiritual sources but from the tension that arises between pragmatic solutions and high political aspirations. Agendas such as ending world hunger, conservation of biodiversity and diversity of species, caring for the earth and democratising organisational decision making drove the development of consensus models. In the next chapter I will present a discussion of the text of the Uniting Church's *Manual* which drew to a significant degree from consensus procedures of grassroots movements but embedded consensus into its own theological premises.

Chapter 11. Discernment and consensus: The *Manual for Meetings* of the UCA

In this chapter I will illustrate how the Uniting Church in Australia, referred to as UCA from hereon, borrowed from a secular consensus model and other elements of secular communication techniques to create its own procedures that would be commensurate with its ecumenical ecclesiology. In doing so, the UCA has contributed a further set of effective elements to the living communal discernment practices that are alive in the life of the wider Church. I will begin with narrating the history and genesis of the *Manual* and then proceed to a more in depth analysis of the text itself.

The Uniting Church in Australia, according to its *Basis of Union*, is organised in five levels of government: the Congregation (two levels: the congregational meeting and the church council), the Presbytery, the Synod and the Assembly. Since the church has structured its government in a system of interrelated councils, decision making often does not simply move from the top down. It is more of an upward, downward and horizontal movement of consultation. The duties and responsibilities each of the five levels of government are described in para. 15 of the *Basis of Union*, as (a) the Congregation, (b) the Elders' or Leaders' Meeting, (c) the Presbytery, (d) the Synod, and (e) the Assembly. The latter

> has determining responsibility for matters of doctrine, worship, government and discipline … [and it] makes the guiding decisions on the tasks and authority to be exercised by other councils.[462]

The Assembly as the national governing body of the Church meets in intervals of three years. Between national Assemblies, an executive council, the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC), acts on behalf of the Assembly.[463] Devising new meeting procedures has essentially been the task of a subcommittee of the Assembly Standing Committee.

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462   *Basis of Union* (2001) para. 15 (e) 28.
463   See *Constitution* (2001) para. 47, 48.

The genesis of the *Manual for Meetings*

In 1988 the Business Committee, approached the 5th Assembly with the request to review the standing orders and rules for debate[464]. The following reason was given for the review: "to tidy up a number of discrepancies, because the rules contained some ambiguities that seemed to hinder the flow of a meeting."[465] A group was established and charged with the review. For the members of the first group, characterised by Jill Tabart as "experienced church-meeting participants and business committee gurus"[466] it soon became clear that mere cosmetic changes to standing orders and rules of debate would not do. Very similar to the experience described in the early chapters the set of rules under review based on the Westminster parliamentary system of decision making was found inadequate because it comprised an adversarial model of winning arguments and defeating opponents. Such a system could not simply be brought into harmony with an ethos of the church that wanted to see mutual respect, listening and discerning realised without instigating fundamental changes. During preliminary discussions the need for a completely new approach to decision making began to emerge. It became obvious that when a church council met there were a variety of activities and processes that contributed to the decision making process. Those procedural and relational aspects mattered as much as the final vote, if not more. Heading the list of issues identified as important for a church council meeting were community building and paying attention to the leading of the Spirit, or the importance of communal spiritual discernment. Both of these matters had to be incorporated into a new set of rules for decision making.

In 1989 a consultation took place between the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) and the first group charged with the review. At the conclusion of this meeting the ASC resolved to broaden the terms of reference to include

> that when a council of the church meets, there are a range of purposes including
> among other things, inspiration, worship, reflection, information sharing, information

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464 Mrs Tricia Lewis as chair of the Business Committee presented a report to the Assembly (minuted as 88.11.3.c in the minutes of the 1988 Assembly notes) which ended with the request to the Standing Committee "to appoint a Task Group to review the standing orders and rules of debate and, after consultation with the Legal Reference Committee, to recommend appropriate amendments to the Standing Committee for presentation to the next Assembly".

465 Tabart, *Coming to Consensus*, 1.

466 Ibid., 1.

gathering, affirmation of a group or action, promotion, discussion, fellowship, accountability and decision making.[467]

The shift between the previous and the new charges actually signified a reorientation from making isolated changes to rules of debating to the rewriting of the Church's meeting practices which were to be embedded in, informed and shaped by a Uniting Church ecclesiology. Ethos and theology of the Uniting Church were to provide the primary context for its practice of decision making. Meeting procedures and the life of faith of the Church had been recognised as inseparable. In practical terms this meant the creation of a set of procedures and activities that would facilitate a confluence of worship, community building, leadership, commitment to effective relationships – and all these elements would need to be embedded in a communal discerning of the Spirit's leading for the purpose of making decisions.

With this new set of issues in mind the task group went back to work. Between the fifth and sixth Assembly the group met seven times. A first comprehensive draft was presented by the task group to the ASC in 1991 during their March session.[468] In response to the report the ASC supported the development of

> a suite of meeting procedures based on the notion that meetings of councils of the church in pursuing their objectives are expressions of Christian community.[469]

During the 6th Assembly (1991) in Brisbane the task group was finally officially appointed and given the job to completely rework meeting procedures for the Uniting Church.[470] The task

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467   Quoted from Chapter 9, 5 of Mark Burrow's thesis, Assembly Task Group on Standing Orders and Rules of Debate. "Report to the Assembly Standing Committee; Sep. 1989". Accessed through the UCA Assembly Secretariat, Sydney, 2; and Uniting Church in Australia, "Minutes of the Assembly Standing Committee; Sep. 1989", UCA Assembly Secretariat, Sydney, 12. I have been unable to see the thesis in its entirety and can therefore not reference it with its full title.

468   Assembly Task Group on Standing Orders and Rules of Debate. "Report to the Assembly Standing Committee; March 1991", Accessed through the UCA Assembly Secretariat, Sydney. Quoted in Mark Burrows, chapter 9, 6.

469   Uniting Church in Australia. "Minutes of the Assembly Standing Committee; March 1991", 6–7. Quoted by Mark Burrows, chapter 9, 7.

470   Minutes and Reports of the sixth Assembly 1991 Brisbane, p 61, section 3.5 state: In its report to the Sixth Assembly the Assembly Standing Committee which met seven times between 1988 and 1991 records the following matter pertaining to the standing orders and rules of debate as business arising from the Fifth Assembly:
A Task group to review Standing Orders and Rules of Debate (Assembly Minute 88.11.3c) was appointed. The Committee has received two progress reports from the Task Group. The terms of reference for the Task Group's work have been enlarged, with the result that contacts have been made with other church bodies in various parts of the world. The Task Group has now been asked to develop "a suite of meeting procedures based on the notion that meetings of the councils of the church in pursuing their objectives are expressions of Christian community". Further reports are expected to Standing Committee, with a final report to come to the Seventh Assembly.

group resumed its meetings with the agenda to incorporate more clearly the spiritual dimension of church council meetings by placing them "under God, seeking to do his will … and to seek wisdom as we meet in council together."[471] The drafts that were produced between 1991 and 1993 began to show the articulation of a "body theology" which valued the corporate as well as the individual dimension of church council meetings. All of them stated that the new meeting procedures were to express

> [a] concept of the church as the Body of Christ. Membership is acknowledged in the notion of community, and the value of each member is recognised in the procedures that allow each member free and fair participation in the processes of the meeting.[472]

At the 1993 Synod of Western Australia, a draft of the *Manual* was tried under the leadership of Jill Tabart. Then, at the 7th Assembly 1994 in Sydney, the new *Manual for Meetings in the Uniting Church* was officially introduced by the president elect Jill Tabart as the new guidelines for meeting procedures.[473] During this Assembly all Synods in principle accepted the *Manual* for future use. In 1996, a final version named *A Manual for Meetings in the Uniting Church* was for the first time publicised as part of the Constitution and Regulations. It was printed in the colour green. The 1999 edition of the constitution and regulations maintained the text of the 1996 version without change. The 2001 edition shows a revised version of the *Manual* which I will discuss in more detail below.

One notable innovation contained in the 1996 version, which has been part of many church's council meetings was the introduction of blue and orange cards. Each member of a council would receive one card of each colour to indicate sympathy or warmth, orange, or disagreement,

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471 Assembly Task Group on Standing Orders and Rules of Debate. "Report to the Assembly Standing Committee; September 1991, 3., quoted from Mark Burrows, chapter 9, 7.

472 Uniting Church in Australia. "Draft Manual", Aug. 1992, 5; "Draft Manual", Feb. 1993, 3. Quoted from Burrows, chapter 9, 8.

473 Minutes and Reports of the 7th Assembly 1994 Sydney: "Risking the Way of Jesus" 94.05 Business Committee: Mr. Geoff Grinton and Rev. Hamish Christie-Johnson led a session introducing business procedures including *A Manual for Meetings in the Uniting Church* prepared as a result of discussions at the 5th Assembly. 94.05.06 "A Manual for Meetings in the Uniting Church"
(a) to adopt the procedures of *A Manual for Meetings in the Uniting Church* for the business of the Seventh Assembly from Sunday morning onwards, including the use of working groups and voting cards as outlined in paragraph 4.5 and the amended paragraph 4.6 of the report of the Business Committee;
(b) to request the Standing Committee to:
  (i)   revise the *Manual for Meetings in the Uniting Church* following evaluation of its use at this Assembly;
  (ii) commend the *Manual for Meetings in the Uniting Church*, after revision, for use by the council of the church in place of the current standing orders.

coldness, blue, towards a proposal. The holding up of cards replaced straw polls and enabled a quick visual evaluation of a large group's mood.

In spite of the in principle acceptance of the Synods, the nationwide implementation, unfortunately, took place without substantial financial support.[474] There was no nationally coordinated advertising and/or educational campaign. A training video was planned to come out containing illustrative footage taken from the 7th Assembly, but the plan was never completed. This must in part be attributed to the Uniting Church's limited human resources and finances. This state of affairs is an indication for the Church's occasional inability to follow through with its sincere intention of ongoing reforming. But in spite of the weaknesses in the process of implementation the *Manual* came to be widely used across the Synods of the Uniting Church, although how widely exactly, is unknown. Personal observation suggests that there are still a great number of congregations, particularly in rural areas that have not adopted the *Manual* for its decision making.

Overview of the *Manual for Meetings*

The *Manual* is a text composed from a diversity of genres. The meaning of the word '*manual*' suggests "a book of instructions, especially for operating a machine or learning a subject" or "a handbook", linking the term back to the Latin *manualis,* from *manus,* meaning hand.[475] The Latin term *manualis* goes back to "a book of the forms to be used by the priests in the administration of the Sacraments."[476] Calling a piece of writing a "*manual*" then suggests a set of instructions related to a set of tasks designed to teach the user(s) how to implement these tasks effectively. This definition raises the expectation of a document displaying a set of procedures for practice, in comprehensive language and in a systematic manner.

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474 Mark Burrows interviewed some of the key persons involved in the creation and implementation of the *Manual.* In chapter 9 of his thesis he records some of the details he found and collated. No distinct sources were identified in the design of the *Manual,* other than the views of the participating members and no substantial records were kept about the process of designing the *Manual.* I have therefore confined myself to engaging only those sources which provide content that is identical with the concepts of the *Manual.* Burrows gives an account of the half-hearted and scantily resourced approach of the Assembly in its distribution and advertising of the *Manual* on pp 24–25.

475 Bruce Moore, (ed.), *The Australian Oxford Dictionary. The ultimate guide to Australian English.* Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1999, 823.

476 Ibid., 823.

The aims of the *Manual for Meetings*

The 1996 version of the *Manual* begins with an introduction written by the Assembly's General Secretary of that time, Gregor Henderson. In his introduction he directs the reader's attention to the significance of this document in the life of the Church. He points out that this *Manual* is designed to help church councils to conduct meetings in a way that reaches beyond stating "motions, amendments and debates … thus making a large contribution to the "ethos" of the church" (195). In the spirit of a consensus model Henderson identifies the main aims of the *Manual* as:

– listening to others,

– seeking mutual solutions,

– working together on a shared hope or difficulty,

– building community

– and above all … seeking the will of God for the church (195).

Henderson also points to the fact that the first part of the *Manual* is essential for a proper understanding of the second part, the procedures. In doing so he alerts the reader to the fact that the *Manual* does not simply represent a handbook filled with procedural technicalities, but a document that must be studied and internalised in terms of its theological meanings and intentions as well as its procedures. His successor, Rev. Terence Corkin, is more explicit about the use of consensus procedures in his introduction of the 2001 and 2004 editions. After the *Manual* has been in use for some years, Corkin suggests that

> [m]any people have now had some experience of consensus decision-making. Consensus decision-making is more than orange and blue cards. Rather, it is a whole process that explores how to bring matters before a meeting in the most helpful way.[477]

Although consensus lies at the heart of the *Manual's* meeting procedures it is not a goal *per se*. Rather, it is sought in the interest of a just and fair process of arriving at decisions which would enable all participants to transcend or at least set aside conflict and come together in an outcome

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477   2001 version, 254; 2004 version, 6.

everyone can support. In this sense, consensus procedures are regarded as a methodology of "uniting".

The structure of the *Manual for Meetings*

The *Manual* is organized in 8 chapters, which are divided into two major parts. Part A is headed "Meeting Together". Chapter 1 deals with a variety of issues pertaining to "The formation of community", chapter 2 addresses "Why we meet together", while chapter 3 answers the question, "How we meet together". It lists the type of meeting formats that may be used, such as:

- general session;
- information session;
- deliberative session; or
- decision session.

Each of these sessions is preceded by worship. A general session may include ceremonial addresses and other fixed items, while information, deliberation and decision sessions represent the core rhythm of the consensus decision making process. The technical details of these three sessions are discussed in detail in chapter 6. Chapter 4 discusses the notion and procedural details of "consensus decision making", it is therefore headed, "How we make decisions". This concludes Part A. Part B is entitled: "Procedures" and outlines in more depth the technical aspects of the consensus decision making model. A lengthy chapter 5 explains in 17 paragraphs how a meeting is to be run by the chairperson. Chapter 6 takes the reader through the three types of sessions listed in chapter 3. After an issue has been introduced and sufficiently discussed, the final stage of obtaining consensus arises. Several pathways to a final decision are available to the chairperson by way of asking questions.[478] Consensus is declared (6.7) when a proposal is either unanimously accepted or clearly rejected. One step down from consensus, the *Manual* suggests "Agreement" which notes a minority of dissenters who are willing to step aside to let a proposal go ahead. If a minority is unwilling to step aside and the decision cannot be

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478   See section 6.6.

deferred (6.10), a majority vote is initiated (6.11). In case of the absence of pressure to make an immediate decision, other options are possible:

– referring the issue to another council or body for determination;

– referring the issue back to the original party or to another special group for further consideration and later resubmission to this council;

– deciding that the matter be no longer considered (6.12).

Chapter 7 describes decision making by formal majority and chapter 8 concludes the *Manual* by addressing issues pertaining to the proper application of the *Manual*. Appendix A is a list of Synod secretaries.

The 1996/1999 edition offers a supplementary description of "One method of subgroup participation in decision-making", called "A sample of Small Group Participation in Decision-Making". Appendix B provides an in-depth treatment of a special mode of a "Deliberative Session" under chapter 3.4. The terms "subgroups", "small groups" or "working groups" are used interchangeably. This method is used when meetings stretch over several days and have to cope with a large body of participants and numerous and/or controversial proposals. Small groups should not exceed 8–10 members each. They provide an opportunity for each participant to make a personal contribution to the process of decision making. The small group mode of deliberation ensures that a consensus seeking process is maintained even though contentious or complex proposals are properly dealt with while a large number of members are present.

Appendix A in the 2001/2004 edition simply contains a list of contacts for synod offices across Australia. Appendix B picks up the "Example of Small Group Participation listed in Appendix A in the 1996/1999 edition. The *Manual* states the aims of the small working groups in the 2001/2004 edition[479] as follows:

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479 I am following the 2001/2004 edition here because it states the four aims in a more generalised way. Except for the first point the texts of the two editions are identical. The second paragraph of this section of the *Manual* indicates that working groups were particularly helpful during the 1994 Assembly which is why this process was included into the meeting procedures. The 1996 edition states as the first aim: "to facilitate discussion on key proposals brought to the Assembly; the working groups were involved in the process of decision-making which helped formulate Assembly resolutions". This process did in fact led to a greater involvement of participants in the decision making, as the first aim in the 2001 edition indicates.

- To facilitate discussion on key proposals by involving people more closely in the process of decision-making;
- To enable the opinions of individual members of the Assembly to be expressed and to be heard and explored by others;
- To help build a sense of community within the Assembly;
- To ensure communication between Assembly members, the Business Committee, and the agencies and commissions of the Assembly.

It is in the small group procedures that the preparation of a decision by consensus comes into its own. Both editions provide Working Group Response Forms, concluding a detailed description of the process. The first edition of 1996 ends here, whereas the 2001/2004 edition has added more material. Appendix C entails a text called "Shortcuts for Chairpersons", twelve points that repeat chapter 4.6 referring to the various duties and activities of the chairperson in an overview. It is followed by two pages, headed "Crib Sheet for Chairpersons", a distilled practical guide through the maze of points of order, procedural proposals, formal majority process and issues to be reconsidered. These two resources help the chairperson to remain orientated throughout the potentially complex and varied stages of decision making.

In contrast to Butler's description, in the Uniting Church's model, the chairperson is the sole bearer of all procedural responsibilities. Personal observations of Presbytery and Synod meetings have, however, demonstrated that the chairperson, who usually is the moderator of a Synod, is frequently advised on both content and process in relation to a proposal by either a previous moderator, the general secretary, or the senior staff member who is most knowledgeable in policies and procedures. Furthermore, a group of minute takers is continuously busy with typing up current changes to proposals which are directly projected onto large screens to be tracked by the plenum. These are important supportive roles that bear directly on the ability of the chairperson to function effectively in navigating proposals during a meeting. They remain, however, unnamed in the text of the *Manual*.

Existing conventions are recreated into new discourses

In approaching the *Manual for Meetings in the Uniting Church* it is surprising to find a great deal more on the thirty pages of this little book of instructions, than sets of guidelines intended to facilitate the smooth running of meetings by councils of the church. As Henderson pointed out above, the text contains "theological meanings to be internalised" for the smooth procedural running of a meeting. In a unique mix the text of the *Manual* incorporates passages that inform, instruct, theologically reflect, edify, even predict. The different types of writings relate to a wide range of matters, such as communal spiritual discernment, creating working relationships, establishing, maintaining and dissolving impermanent committees, different types of sessions and how to run them. Chapter 5 begins with a glossary of terms. Section 1.3 simply contains quotes from the *Basis of Union* to indicate a link between the two documents. This idiosyncratic mix of items and concerns is underpinned by a strong commitment of the authors to create a theologically grounded approach to decision making with an emphasis on community building.

As mentioned before, the introduction of the *Manual* represented a significant institutional change in relation to the previous process of the UCA's decision making based on *Robert's Rules.* The English linguist Norman Fairclough provides an analytical lens that brings the nature of such a change into focus and highlights the ways in which it may come to take shape in new documents.[480] Fairclough points out that institutional structures represent orders of discourse, that is, certain defined ways of speaking and thinking about an issue or a process. Once a structural change is introduced, the way a community speaks and thinks about the same issue changes. In this case, it can be assumed that change took place from celebrating a "win through a majority vote" which frequently involved sidelining a minority, to celebrating the accomplishment of a consensus which emphasises the constructive participation of all. Such changes in discursive practices often do not occur in a smooth and seamless manner. In fact, texts which reflect such change may show signs of logical inconsistencies or breaks in the flow of meaning. Hence, newly constructed texts that express a change in discourse appear more like

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480   N. Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992. See especially chapter 7 headed 'Change through discourse practices', 87–98.

patchwork or piecemeal. Fairclough asserts that those charged with the articulation of a new structure often do so

> by being innovative and creative, by adapting existing conventions in new ways, and so contributing to discursive change … Change involves forms of transgression, crossing boundaries, such as putting together existing conventions in new combinations, or drawing upon conventions in situations which usually preclude them.[481]

The text of the *Manual* confirms Fairclough's analysis in a number of ways. For example, in section 1.3 which carries the heading "Building a Sense of Community", the text begins with a statement that in one sentence lines up a number of big theological issues:

> The communal nature of the relationship expressed in the Trinity and re-expressed in the Body of Christ provides a model for the type of community we become, and both enlightens and sets limits to our agenda; for the church is a community created by Christ and sustained by the Spirit.

Although section 1.2 quotes segments from the *Basis of Union* to indicate a connection between the two documents, what is said in section 1.3 neither continues a previous theme nor connects logically with anything that what was expressed before. The issues of the Trinitarian being of God, "community", "Church", "Christ" and "process" are only loosely strung together. The reader gets a sense of the importance of the communal nature of the Trinity and the importance of the "Body of Christ", often used as a term for the Church in Paul's letters. Yet, how the meeting agenda is enlightened and limited by both of these two theological terms is not explained. A further theological statement follows, which declares:

> Community-building activities for the church start with the acknowledgement of the headship of Christ and the individuals' membership together as the Body of Christ.

On the surface this appears related to the preceding statement, because the term "Body of Christ" is repeated. But upon closer examination, there is more mixing and matching of theological terms going on, without really clarifying their relationship to one another. The

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481 Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, 96.

two sentences continue into an introduction of formal and informal worship as traditional community-building exercises:

> Gathering and affirming the church as a community of faith has traditionally been through the worship of God, formal and informal.

Although there can be little doubt that worship has a community building capacity, this is not its purpose. The sense of belonging that is created through worship is to be deepened by "sharing personal experiences about belonging to the group". The text then moves on to items that should make the group "fully effective [through] group dynamics".

The interspersed comments on worship are followed by a list of contemporary communication and relationship skills, qualified as necessary elements to be present for "a group to be effective". The list continues with the community building theme. We note that skills and attitudes relevant for leading worship, conducting community prayer, facilitating periods of silence or providing pastoral care remain absent. The lack of attention to the nature of worship and the skills necessary to conduct worship suggests that worship is regarded as a prefix or appendix to business, rather than a main event in the course of a meeting for business. Because the Uniting Church places great value on a highly educated laity and clergy the presence of worship skills may have also been taken as a given. However, the parallel tracks of theological underpinnings and the liturgical practice of worship on the one hand and the need for effective human interaction remain throughout, made obvious in the use of two different discourses or languages: one that seeks to create continuity with central theological themes contained in the *Basis of Union* and another that displays continuity with communicative practices of the social sciences.

The brittleness in discursive integrity signifies two drives: firstly, the *Manual's* innovative thrust in terms of the commitment to a spiritual ethos in a normally secular set of procedures, and secondly its desire to resource human interaction and the need for community building with concepts and technical 'know-how' from the field of Social work. The latter is informed by the work of educational practitioner Robert Bolton who drew heavily from the writings of

the founder of the person-centred approach to helping, Carl Rogers.[482] I will analyse the use of these sources in more depth under the heading "Building communication and building relationships" below.

From section 1.3 onwards, in the 2001/2004 edition, the language of group dynamics and the values of the person-centred model of relating begin to dominate content and procedures. I have earlier commented on the first paragraphs of 1.3 in the 2001/2004 edition and will now pick up our reflection where the text emphasises that

> [w]ithin this context of worship and belonging, the work of a community group needs to encompass the conscious decision to develop an effective group.

"[T]he conscious decision to develop an effective group" is not left to the chairperson but is given to each member. The list of dot points that follows comprises again a "mix and match approach", mentioning terms from group dynamics and community building, attempting to underline shared leadership approach, a positive approach to conflict and a constructive way of interacting.

Leadership is conceived of in a functional and collegial context rather than in the mold of an institutionalised hierarchical power. Each person is taken seriously in his or her capacity to contribute to the meeting and its outcome. Each voice is meant to speak and to be heard. At the same time, each person is asked to direct their gifts towards the benefit of the whole group. Goals, once they have been collaboratively generated, need the whole meeting community to come to fruition. The theme of unity in diversity that resonates with Paul's image of the body of Christ continues to thread through the text, especially where conflict is concerned. There are, however, no further strategies offered to address conflict, other than to acknowledge its reality as part of meetings.

Sections 1.4 and 1.5 address aspects pertaining to the life expectancy of a meeting community. They highlight the need for alertness in terms of rebuilding the sets of relationships of a meeting

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482   Especially from Carl Rogers, 'The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change.' 43–74. In: Ben N. Ard, (ed.), *Counseling and Psychotherapy. Classics on Theories and Issues.* Palo Alto: Science and Behaviour Books, 1966. I will expand on the significance of using these sources further below.

when membership fluctuates and point to the reality of meetings having a beginning and an end in life span.

Building communication and building relationships

Sections 1.6 and 1.7 list the practical skills and personal qualities required to achieve the kind of effective relationships that are necessary for conducting a productive meeting. Listening skills, assertion skills, conflict resolution and collaborative problem solving skills are expected to go a long way in helping a meeting community to function. Pastoral tools, such as prayer, theological reflection on scriptures, the intentional use of silence and any reflective feedback mechanisms ensuring a reasonable level of shared understanding do not feature. Good listening skills are valued highly, enabling members "to solve their own problems or are encouraged to contribute their own ideas to the group without becoming dependent on others." Van Deusen Hunsinger asserts that "[g]ood listening involves three essential skills. The first is accurate paraphrase – to receive with accuracy the concrete content of what is being said. … The second skill … is productive questioning. It involves the ability to ask open-ended and closed questions. … The third skill … is what's called perception check. One needs to be able to distinguish one's observations from the interferences one makes on the basis of those observations," in other words, separate accurate perception from potential distortions or evaluation.[483] Hunsinger's assertion gives insight into the complexity of exercising the skill that is listening.

The second set in section 1.7 does not actually denote skills, but inner dispositions, personal qualities, or as Carl Rogers called them, "conditions" [484]: genuineness, non-possesive love and empathy. More accurately, this section should be headed "Conditions that create good relationships". I suspect that the authors of the *Manual* were unaware of the detail of Roger's work, especially in relation to communication and relationships. They did, however, even if inadvertently, borrow heavily from his work, as already mentioned, through the well-known

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483   Van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray without Ceasing*, 69.

484   In his explanation of these conditions see Carl Rogers, 'The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change.' 43–74. In: Ben N. Ard, (ed.), *Counseling and Psychotherapy. Classics on Theories and Issues.* Palo Alto: Science and Behaviour Books, 1966. This article was first published in 1957 in the *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 1957, 21: 95–103.

book by Robert Bolton, *People Skills*.[485] Because Bolton drew from Rogers' core ideas, this illuminates the *Manual's* text in relation to which parts of Roger's thinking were taken on and which were left out. It makes transparent the relational ethos to which the authors were committed but it also highlights those aspects that were omitted for reasons unknown to me.

The content of sections 1.6 and 1.7 was taken almost verbatim from Bolton's book, *People Skills*[486], in the 1996/1999 edition of the *Manual*. These paragraphs were reworded in truncated form in the 2001/2004 edition. I will briefly expand on Bolton's "key qualities" because they provide important clues for the quality of relationships the authors of the *Manual* wanted to see enacted in meetings.

Because Bolton has adopted Roger's concepts, for example in relation to genuineness and non-possessive love, I will go back to Roger's original text. This will give the concepts at stake the chance to be accurately read from their original source and therefore enable their proper tracking from Rogers to Bolton to the *Manual for Meetings*. Rogers' ideas proved to be highly transferable to pedagogical and ministry contexts where they impacted on pastoral conversation practices and approaches to learning. It was therefore not unusual for members of the church to borrow from his work.

Rogers formulated six specific conditions for the therapeutic relationship which were to initiate change in the personality structure of a person. In Rogers' view change should occur

> at both surface and deeper levels, in a direction which … means greater integration, less internal conflict, more energy utilisable for effective living; change in behaviour away from behaviours generally regarded as immature and towards behaviours regarded as mature.[487]

The six conditions explained in simple and comprehensive terms how the interaction between client and therapist could act as an incentive and vehicle for change. The six conditions were:

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485 Robert Bolton, *People Skills. How to assert yourself, listen to others, and resolve conflicts.* East Roseville, NSW: Simon & Schuster, 1987.

486 Ibid., 259–279. Robert Bolton is an ordained former minister who left the Church to create, together with his wife Dorothy Grove Bolton, a training facility for teachers, people in helping professions, including clergy, and later corporate staff with the purpose to enhance their relating and communication skills. See http://www.ridge.com/Co_History.html Accessed 14/01/2011.

487 Rogers, *The necessary and sufficient conditions*, 127.

1.   Two persons are in psychological contact.

2.   The first, whom we shall term the client, is in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable or anxious.

3.   The second person, whom we shall term the therapist, is congruent or integrated in the relationship.

4.   The therapist experiences unconditional positive regard for the client.

5.   The therapist experiences an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference and endeavours to communicate this experience to the client.

6.   The communication to the client of the therapist's empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal degree achieved.[488]

The six conditions offer a framework within which a person who lacks congruence is helped to grow towards a greater level of integration and authenticity. The client's lack of congruence, genuineness or authenticity[489] is gradually corrected because the therapist's own congruence and authenticity are encouraging the client in her or his world of experience to do the same. As the therapist immerses him or herself into the world of the client's experience and begins to share openly, honestly and without judgement, that is without criticalness or condemnation, what he or she is becoming aware of, the client's courage to embrace his or her own personal reality more fully increases. The client begins to show some empathy and unconditional regard for his or her personal truth via the therapist's accepting and respectful attitude. In this way the therapeutic relationship offers an avenue for change. Genuineness, unconditional positive regard and empathy are inseparably intertwined. They form an internal benevolent disposition in the therapist. Rogers explains this point further:

> To sense the client's private world as if it were your own, but without ever losing the "as if" quality – this is empathy … To sense the client's anger, fear, or confusion as if it were your own, yet without your own anger, fear, or confusion getting bound up in it, is the condition we are endeavouring to describe. When the client's world is this clear

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488   Ibid., 127–128.

489   The three terms are used interchangeably by both Rogers and Bolton.

to the therapist, and he moves about in it freely, then he can both communicate his understanding of what is clearly known to the client and can also voice meanings in the client's experience of which the client is scarcely aware.[490]

It is important to highlight that Rogers does not expect a symbiotic identification from the therapist which leads to his or her loss of self. He invites the therapist "to sense" the client's emotions and inner experiences "as if" they were the therapist's own. That is, part of the therapist's effectiveness consists in maintaining his or her personal distinctiveness and some element of distance towards the client at all times. But in the perceptive or immersive aspect lies the receptive dimension of empathy. As part of the active dimension of empathy the therapist communicates what he or she became conscious of as part of the empathic immersion. This reflective-interpretative response on the part of the therapist represents the element which has the power to move the client's understanding of him or herself to a new place.

Rogers' approach was highly prized and widely applied in other areas of learning, growth and change, such as the counselling and educational sectors and the realm of pastoral care[491] because of its non-pathologising, person-centred approach growth.[492] Rogers had observed with his clients, that once the right relational climate was in place, the client would naturally grow, that is, become more inclined, integrated and motivated towards self-actualisation. Rogers believed in the innate tendency of the human organism to evolve to its highest potential, given the most favourable relational environment.

From this background I now return to the text of the *Manual*. As the *Manual's* section 1.7 is read against the Rogers' criteria for the therapeutic relationship some points of contact arise. Condition one, if it were to be included in a document like the *Manual* would have to read

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490 Rogers, *The necessary and sufficient conditions*, 132–133.

491 See for example the article 'Carl Rogers', 411–422 by Fred Zimring. In: *Prospect: quarterly review of comparative education*. Paris, UNESCO: International Board of Education, vol. XXIV, 3/4, 1994. At: http://pdfcast.org/pdf/carl-rogers Accessed 15/01/2011. Gerard Egan, *The Skilled Helper. A Systematic Approach to Effective Helping*. Pacific Grove, California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1990 and the earlier editions from 1982 and 1975. Egan makes ample reference to Roger's work in relation to the conditions of helping and change.

492 See for example the influence of Rogers on clinical pastoral education in a current definition of pastoral care: "Pastoral care is a person-centred, holistic approach to care that complements the care offered by other helping disciplines while paying particular attention to spiritual care." At the website of the Pastoral Care Council of the ACT: www.pastoralcareact.org/ Accessed 20/01/2011.

something like, *two persons are in a pastoral relationship or, a group of persons is meeting for decision making in a pastoral context*. The 1996/1999 edition of the *Manual* offers a description of genuineness as "being honest and open about our own feelings, needs and ideas". These words, taken from Bolton's text, paraphrase Rogers' notion of the therapist being "freely and deeply himself, with his actual experience accurately represented by his awareness of himself."[493] The *Manual* (1996/1999 edition) suggests that each member of a meeting enters into the process of decision making with a certain level of genuineness. A person must have some level of self knowledge or self awareness, some level of congruence between a person's internal reality or truth and what a person is able to communicate about themselves to others. Congruence and genuineness are like two sides of the same coin.

What Rogers identified as "unconditional positive regard" or "warm acceptance for the other" is equivalent to the *Manual's* item of "Non-possessive love". Rogers' well known concept of unconditional positive regard entailed a willingness and intention to abstain from all rejection while the client was presenting her/himself in the therapeutic process. The ideal Rogers was striving for consisted in the therapist's willingness to accept a client's positive as well as negative qualities without engaging in mental evaluation or judgment.[494]

The *Manual* paraphrases Bolton's and Roger's term of "non-possessive love" as "accepting, respecting and supporting other people in a way which accepts them as equals and frees them to contribute as important individuals." Bolton, however, quotes Rogers who adds a spiritual dimension to this kind of love that is grounded in the New Testament.[495] Rogers said of non-possessive love that "it means a kind of love for the person as he is, providing we understand the word love as the equivalent of the theologian's term 'agape' and not in its usual romantic and possessive meanings."[496] Connecting non-possessive love with agape love creates an associations

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493   Bolton deals with genuineness in three paragraphs, headed Self-Awareness, Self-Acceptance and Self-Expression. In doing so he precisely follows Rogers' wording. See Bolton, *People Skills*, 259–261.

494   Rogers, 'The necessary and sufficient conditions', 131–132.

495   Both Rogers and Bolton have a background in theological education. Rogers began his university studies with theology for ministry and then changed course to become a doctor and psychiatrist. Bolton spent several years working as an ordained minister and then left the church to work on training persons who worked in helping professions in communication skills.

496   Bolton, *People Skills*, 262–263, quoted from: Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961. Bolton does not give a page reference.

with Paul's famous exposition in 1 Cor. 13, described as the kind of love that is patient and kind, hopes and endures all things.

Bolton's summary statement on "empathy" quoted in the *Manual* is a truncated version of Rogers' text. It only makes reference to that aspect of empathy which addresses "the ability to see and hear another person and understand that person's perspective or point of view." It does not address the active dimension that requires acts of reflective communication of what has been perceived about the world of the other. In the latter real understanding between two people is actualised. Omitting the active dimension of empathy, fatally cripples human interaction to the act of perceiving. Perception alone, however, even if it is accurate, does not create understanding. Understanding arises from the ***mutual*** realisation that an aspect of personal reality has been accurately perceived between two people or a person and a group. For the context of decision making this means that understanding among members must be enacted in two ways: as the accurate perception of another person's point of view; and as a realised level of shared clarity about having been accurately perceived. The first is achieved through careful listening, the second through skilful, accurate reflection.

The 2001 edition of the *Manual* reduced the description of empathy further to describe it as "understanding another person's perspective or point of view even if you don't agree". This paraphrase omits the vital part of "the ability to see and hear another person …" which is a clear precondition for "understanding another person's perspective". Thus the rewording of the text deleted a small but vital detail related to the effective working of empathy. On the other hand the 2001 text inserts an aspect which often inhibits a member's ability to be empathic, namely disagreement. This represents an important acknowledgement of the need for empathic connection even in the face of serious differences.

The last condition in Roger's count enhances the function of empathy, as I have already stated above. It is important to consider Roger's description because it provides the crucible for change. Without this aspect, change cannot occur. If included it would enable the *Manual* to provide a

more complete definition of 'understanding' for the purpose of human interaction. This is how Rogers defines his last condition:

> The final condition … is that the client perceives, to a minimal degree, the acceptance and empathy which the therapist experiences for him.[497]

The client's perception of being accepted is based on the therapist's feedback on the client's world of experience. Together with the absence of judgement and the transmission of respect which the client can derive from the therapist's reflective words, the client retrieves energy and motivation for change. This feedback loop is essential for the establishment of understanding. It is not enough to have achieved a vague sense or feeling understood. It must be precisely expressed and perceived as such to qualify as understanding, so that it can do its work of facilitating effective relationships and the possibility for a change in the client's perspective and attitude. The *Manual's* text has to address this fact both as attitude or "key quality" and as communicative skill in order to build and sustain effective meeting communities and a space where change can occur.

Until now, I have critically examined the use of Roger's person-centred approach with regard to his understanding of change through empathic understanding. I have furthermore looked at the use of Rogers' ideas for the context of the Uniting Church's *Manual for Meetings*. The main point of criticism relates to the lack of proper follow-through. The eclectic use of Roger's attitudes and practices have rendered the *Manual's* intent to create positive relationships for the context of decision making ineffective to a degree. This is particularly regrettable because Rogers' person-centred ethos approximates in many ways the church's own ethos of respect for the value of each person extended from Christ's valuing of each one. This is especially obvious in sections 1 and 2 of the *Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice* by the Uniting Church. Section 1.1 for example states,

> The church is sustained by Christ through baptism, the Eucharist and preaching of the Word. Its life and fellowship is derived from the fact that the Church is the Body of Christ, the presence of Christ in the world. We are united in a fellowship of love,

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497   Rogers, 'The necessary and sufficient conditions,' 134.

service, suffering and joy through our shared faith in Christ. We worship, pray, give our witness, study Scripture and other sources of faith, offer pastoral care to each other, develop deep friendships, and seek to be mutually accountable. We are, for this reason, a deeply intimate community.

Rogers' understanding of the person generally lends itself to be used in a faith-based model of decision making that calls for a form of "spiritual relationship" which is particularly pertinent to decision making. The highly idealised 'agape love' that Paul exhorts in 1 Cor. 13 could be brought into the realm of actual human interaction if Rogers' practice of creating understanding were more fully understood and applied. When a meeting invites the Spirit into facilitating genuineness, non-possessive love and enhancing the creation of understanding and the Spirit is expected to facilitate empathy in perception and accurate, reflective feedback, a discerning environment becomes a reality and growth in understanding as part of the body of Christ becomes possible.

Consensus, discernment and the UCA's ecclesiology

Chapters 2 and 3 of the *Manual* address a host of technical aspects relevant for the initial setting up of meetings. Chapter 4 (2001/2004 edition) is concerned with the consensus dimension of the meeting. It begins with a definition of consensus that reads:

> Consensus is a process by which a common mind of the meeting is sought about the wisest way forward on a particular issue at the time.

The definition of "consensus" is void of any theological terms. "Common mind" and "wisest way forward" are expressions which could equally describe the mode of decision making of a charitable organisation, or any other community organisation for that matter, without any religious affiliation, but committed to a consensus process. A decision taken by consensus entails that "all agree to a way forward". Consensus as outcome is not included in the central definition but rather stated in the paragraphs that follow the definition. There is more about "true consensus" which

is not the same as unanimity. We must be careful to recognise that consensus arises out of real community, and often only through real tension as people express their insights with passion and integrity, and yet with respect for really hearing others' points of view.

These words resonate strongly with chapter 1, especially section 1.6 and 1.7 (2001/2004 version) which I critically analysed above. But where is the connection with the first sentence in chapter 1 that stated that

[w]hen a council of the church makes decisions, it is aiming to discern the guidance of the Spirit in response to the Word of God[?]

The first sentence that follows the definition of consensus is a negative reference to the thought of the introductory paragraph. It states,

[o]f course, it can never be claimed that this way has determined the will of God – but, as the *Basis of Union* declares, we rely on the Spirit in order that we may not lose the way (paragraph 3).

Although consensus as a process is not defined as a means through which the church is seeking to determine the will of God, it explicitly denies here the possibility of claiming to have determined God's will. Instead, the text states reliance on the Spirit "in order that we may not lose the way".

It is worth remembering at this point, that the Commissioners during union negotiations became jointly convinced that God was calling them to church union. The argument was christologically and ecclesiologically grounded, shifting from dogma to kerygma, and from designing a new confession to confessing together, thus laying the foundation for a new church. The Commissioners helped the three churches to understand that from now on, being a pilgrim people on the way to its promised end,[498] included much unfinished business. But it would not lack in obedience to God's call to become a 'uniting' church.

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498 This famous turn of phrase is firmly enshrined in the foundational document of the Uniting Church, *The Basis of Union,* para. 3 and 18. At: http://assembly.uca.org.au/images/stories/HistDocs/basisofunion1992.pdf Accessed 03/10/2013.

By weakening the claim to finding unity in decision making and its grounding in Christ's call to unity, expressed, for example, in Paul's famous model of one-body-many-members, the authors of the *Manual* may have wanted to avoid the danger of absolutising theological claims in relation to contentious decisions. However, on the other hand, not embracing the possibility of arriving at unity in decision making with a more explicit commitment seems like an avoidance of trusting the Spirit to lead a community to a unified outcome.

The introductory sentences of chapter 1 provided an adequate and carefully worded consideration of the problem of falsely claiming divine authority for a contentious decision by suggesting the employment of the wisdom of hindsight as corrective. This way of putting the issue would have indeed been more helpful to be remembered at the beginning of chapter 4, as a way of avoiding the kind of theological inconsistency described above. It stated at the beginning of chapter 1:

> In retrospect, …, some decisions are considered to have been visionary and innovative, others inappropriate and destructive, whether or not they were seen that way at the time – discernment is not something for which we can set down rules.

Admitting that decisions can prove to be wrong in hindsight, even if they were regarded as good decisions at the time is followed by the recognition that making-decisions-in-community is a means of *minimising*, not eradicating, error, especially when the relationships among members are built in the spirit of genuineness.

Chapter 4.1 continues with the mention of the Abilene paradox by referring to it as "pseudo consensus" as defined by Scott Peck. However, the text makes no suggestions as to how to avoid the occurrence of a pseudo consensus. A paragraph inserted on the reality of conflict and on skilful handling of it could mitigate this potential pitfall. A large part of the remainder of chapter 4 is then taken up with the role of the chairperson who is charged with the responsibility "to be sensitive to the mood of the meeting", to "state explicitly what appears to be the common mind of the group" and to "test the feeling of the group" by presenting various options at the appropriate time. The chairperson is also asked to "watch carefully for signs of dissent" so as

to give members with differing views enough air space before suggesting ways forward. The chairperson's role is summarised as

> Presiding at a meeting in a manner that
>
> - assists the council to discern the will of God as far as possible;
> - meets the needs and purposes of the council and its members.

Except for section 4.1 chapter 4 is for the most part a procedural chapter, although it is meant to conclude part A of the community building section of the *Manual.* Chapters 5–8 contain a the nuts and bolts of how to conduct meetings, which require no further explanation.

The ecumenical impact of the *Manual for Meetings'* consensus procedures

The introduction of the Uniting Church's consensus procedures had a ripple effect on a global scale. In 1998 the World Council of Churches began to reconsider its own business procedures. In a small volume released by the World Council of Churches' own publishing house in Geneva, headed *Coming to Consensus. A Case Study for the Churches*[499], former president of the Australian Uniting Church Jill Tabart recounts the struggle to implement a new consensus model of decision making for all levels of government within the Uniting Church in Australia. She traces the progress from its earliest beginnings in 1987 right through to its first practical application during the seventh Assembly in Sydney in 1994. In the foreword to Tabart's book Gregor Henderson, then General Secretary of the Assembly, summarised the changes brought about by the new meeting procedures like this:

> Moving from a parliamentary model to a consensus model has markedly changed
> the ethos of the Uniting Church meetings. Council members have turned away from
> primarily wanting to win an argument towards wanting to engage in a discernment
> process where the will of God is sought through a careful process of listening and
> responding to one another. Making decisions by consensus is far more fruitful than
> the old adversarial approach, both in terms of decisions and relationships.[500]

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499   Jill Tabart, *Coming To Consensus. A Case Study for the Churches.* Risk Book Series. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2003.
500   Ibid., vii/viii.

A special subcommittee of the WCC established to address concerns in the participation of the Orthodox Churches had been created in 1998 at the 8th WCC meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe.[501] The 60 members met four times in a full plenary before the final report was delivered to the WCC in 2002. It had in its appendix a new set of consensus decision making procedures introduced with the hope that they would

> a) enhance the participation of all members in the various meetings; b) preserve the rights of all churches, regions and groupings, especially those which hold a minority opinion; c) provide a more collaborative and harmonious context for the making of decisions; d) enable representatives to have more "space" to discern the will of God for the churches, the WCC and the wider human family.[502]

Between 2002 and 2005 the work on the new set of decision making policies was finalised. In 2006 during the 9th WCC's meeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the new consensus procedures were officially adopted. The new consensus decision making procedures express the hope for a growing unity which lies in the way the member churches treat one another. Adversarial arguments or manipulation of procedures to win a vote are recognised as pathways to fragmentation. Relinquishing those technical manoeuvres that deliver a certain measure of power but create win-lose scenarios, and accepting instead a spiritual process of discerning the work of the Spirit and caring for relationships of mutual respect, has de facto become the *sine qua non* in the ecumenical journey toward unity.

Pulling together the threads

The gift of the *Manual for Meetings* to the whole Church consists in its recognition of genuine community as a condition for spiritual discernment. The value it attributes to good relationships as a decisive factor in building consensus opens the door to a decision making process that could

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501   The final report by the Special Committee highlighted the fact that "[t]he Commission has been unique in World Council history in being composed of an equal number of representatives appointed by Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches and representatives from the other churches belonging to the fellowship of the WCC appointed by the Central Committee. Its co-moderators were Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Ephesus (Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople) and Bishop Rolf Koppe (Evangelical Church in Germany)". 'Final Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC.' Section A. II. History and Process, 2. http://www2.wcc-coe.org/ccdocuments.nsf Accessed 31/08/2010.

502   Ibid., Final Report, Section B, VI. Consensus Model of Decision making.

easily include but in the text omits explicit elements of spiritual discernment, such as prayer, silence, waiting or consulting the scriptures. Unfortunately, the *Manual* does not incorporate its historic inheritance of discernment, which had developed a working method of "uniting" which could make a significant contribution to conflict laden issues. Resolving conflict through the kind of self-inspection and repentance as the early commissioners had practiced would be a worthy process to be included into a manual for decision making in the church. But here it is helpful to remember that consensus decision making and its written procedures are a work in progress. As part of the Church's pilgrimage towards the promised end, it is under eschatological correction and constant reform, as is every other aspect of the life of the Uniting Church. As such the Uniting Church still has the opportunity to glance with new discerning spectacles at its own rich theological and practical heritage and integrate it more fully into its decision making procedures.

Chapter 12. Communal discernment, interaction and decision making

At the conclusion of this investigation a picture of communal discernment emerges that shows depth, richness, diversity and hope for the Church in its bid to retrieve vitality in faith and practice. The mosaic that I sought to build still holds empty spaces, because this has not been an exhaustive exploration of communal discernment practices. Pentecostal and indigenous churches, for example, were not included. But the various elements of a great diversity of practices that have been addressed in this thesis can now be viewed together. While the traditions that have been explored each contribute their own unique practices of discernment, they grew out of a common desire that God who gave the gift of faith in Christ to persons and communities should also be involved in the specific direction of the mission and service of the Church. For some traditions the commitment to spiritual direction was Christ-centred, for others it was more Spirit-centred. However, the underlying common theological assumption was that God was already present and actively involved in the world inside and outside of the walls of the church, and that discerning where and how God was present was discerning the church's call to mission and service.

At the onset of this thesis I loosely described communal discernment as

> *a process for which the members of a Christian community gather to prayerfully exercise their faith, in the hope of discovering binding spiritual direction for the sake of faithful action.*

Although I have discovered considerable variation in the steps and stages of the processes, each tradition, with the exception of grassroots consensus procedures, was seeking to conduct their deliberations prayerfully and often under the guidance of Scripture. Furthermore in most of the traditions I detected a commitment to action, once a particular path or action was emerging as the discerned outcome. My description has thus provided an opportunity to see some of the common foundations in and amongst much variation in the practice of communal discernment.

In the second set of propositions I wanted to name the unique relational environment and interactional practices that are often typical in a communal discernment process. In my reading of the literature I had noticed how the entire relational environment seems to become infused with a culture of prayerful listening to God which 'spilled over', so to speak, into all relationships that are part of the communal discernment environment. I therefore suggested that

> *when a group gathers for a communal process of discernment or faith-based decision making, all facets of interacting change from being casual, arbitrary and habitual toward becoming a potential arena for the Spirit's promptings. Because of the prayerful, Spirit-led nature of the communal discernment process every aspect of interaction takes on the character of a spiritual practice.*

This proposition has been confirmed in a number of different contexts. Paul's admonishment of the Corinthians around the Lord's Supper provided the strongest indication yet, that discerning the presence of Christ calls for a change in behaviour towards one another. The dissolution of social differentials in light of the discernment of Christ's body and blood certainly interrupted the habitual enactment of status grounded in wealth and power and called Corinthians rich and poor into a community of equals as followers of Christ. It was also interesting to discover how the demarcation line between prayerful listening to God and prayerful listening to one another almost unnoticeably faded away and listening to God and listening to one another became one and the same practice. Being open to hearing God speak through the words of ordinary human beings is perhaps the most astonishing aspect of a discerning process of decision making.

As part of the methodology I have pursued in this thesis I committed myself to an ethos of mutual ecclesial learning as it is advocated by the proponents of receptive ecumenism. The questions that I asked from this background are, What can we learn from one another? How can each partner contribute to a widening of the others' horizons? How does partner enrich the faith of the others? Those questions can now be answered with regard to the traditions addressed in this thesis. In the paragraphs that follow I will name each tradition's contribution.

The contribution of each tradition to the life of the Church

Discernment by the prophets

The Hebrew scriptures have given decisive insight into the role of the prophets in Israel's life as God's People. The prophets as God's mouthpiece were called to give clear direction, even if it was to their own detriment. Prophetic discernment and offering guidance, correction or punishment was part of exercising and often lonely prophetic office, rather than being a communal affair. Prophetic authenticity was a matter of the predictions that were uttered in the name of God coming to pass, in the case of Jeremiah. In the deuteronomic context, prophetic activity served the preservation of Israel's identity in a foreign culture. God zealously claimed the undivided attention of God's people in worship as in life. There are conceivable contemporary contexts in which the Church might lose its way, being tempted by wealth and comfort to immerse itself into the surrounding culture and forget its call to care for the poor, the marginalised and the lonely; to be a subversive force for love and justice. In such a context a prophetic call to return to its roots and to worship God and only God could find a valid, contemporary expression.

Discernment in the early Christian communities

The central role of the Spirit in communal discernment surfaced continuously in the texts that testified to the life of the early Church. Discernment was pneumatologically grounded but it was also anchored in the practice of the sacraments. I already pointed out the equalising power of discerning the presence of Christ in the context of the sacrament. Discernment here is a matter of change in attitude and being open to the presence of the living Christ. But it only works if the whole community commits to it. In Romans 12 Paul grounded the process of discernment in the spiritual practice of worship as the pervading dimension of the Christian life. Rather than treating discernment as a one off event, he turns it into a constant practice in the growing spiritual life of the newly converted. Discernment is part of the daily engagement with the world, manifesting in a rhythm of serving those in need, both strangers and friends, and in distinction from the world through extravagant love. This kind of discernment drives persons

as well as the whole of the Christian community to a process of forming a new identity in an often hostile social environment. The formation of the Roman Christians into a community also happened at a time when the return of Christ was becoming increasingly uncertain. The presence of Christ had to be made tangible in the way his followers related to one another and to the surrounding neighbourhood. Discernment in this vein is a profoundly counter-cultural or culture-critical practice. The members of the Christian community, much like the people of Israel in Deuteronomy, are called to distinguish themselves from the corrupting influences of the surrounding culture. However, in this context, it is not a call to disengage from the surrounding culture, but to engage more fully, yet in a distinctly giving way.

The discernment of Jesus

The gospels portrayed Jesus as someone who was no stranger to the need for discernment. During his time in the wilderness, by word and actions, he drew clear boundaries around his relationship with God. Later, he did not shy away from pushing back a friend who showed a lack of discernment by attempting to take control of his mission. Finally, in Gethsemane, Jesus encountered a part of his humanity by facing his own limitations toward accepting the agony of the suffering that was to come. At his lowest point of need, abandoned by his friends, he wrestled through self-doubt and fear, bringing his lament to God. His prayer for a way forward resulted in an acceptance of what was lying ahead.

In the story of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane I found an example for 'cathartic speech' which perhaps deserves a more prominent place in the process of communal discernment. Cathartic speech is a case of Jesus engaging in lamentation. Rather than imploding in silence and being transformed by the prayer of the Spirit in sighs too deep for words, cathartic speech explodes out loud into passionate processing of frustration, anger, suffering and powerlessness. The expression of anger, frustration and powerlessness are often not valued and are therefore rarely articulated in the decision making of the church. The occasional outburst of emotions and misdirected anger tends to confirm the practice of shying away from such expressions. If cathartic speech was an acceptable practice in decision making, the relationships of the participants in a discernment

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process would more often be adequately shielded from the inappropriate and potentially destructive discharge of these negative emotions. This does not entail an encouragement of mutual abuse. Cathartic speech properly understood is a God-directed form of venting, not merely for the purpose of emotional relief but as an interaction with God that has the propensity to bring about change at a dead end in decision making. Just as Jesus vented his despair and desolation to God and arrived at a point of acceptance, so participants in a discernment process could be encouraged to vent to God their limitations and frustrations. The contribution of the prayer of Gethsemane consists in the authentic, God-directed expression of pain and suffering with a view to find new hope.

Discernment in Acts

The writings of Acts provided important teachings about the ways in which the early Church managed some difficult decisions through discernment as part of its missional focus. Luke Timothy Johnson offered a definition that helped to galvanise communal discernment into

> that habit of faith by which we are properly disposed to hear God's Word, and properly disposed to respond to that Word in the practical circumstances of our lives.[503]

The 'habit of faith' was formed through three formational communal activities: listening to the narratives of faith that have gone before, reinterpreting the scriptures in light of Christ's life, death and resurrection and the communal engagement in prayer. The interaction with the narratives of faith formed the basis of the communal discernment for the early Church. As the early Christians listened to the ancient texts they found new ways of reinterpreting those texts in light of Christ's life, death and resurrection. This innovative hermeneutic work opened up new pathways for its mission. The contribution of Luke's account of the Church before and after Pentecost teaches many things about communal discernment. Chief among them is the early communities willingness to entrust themselves to the movement of the Spirit, in tandem with their courage to bring new missional realities into conversation with the authoritative texts of their ancient tradition. Often pressured by circumstances and faced with the unknown, the

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503   Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 110.

early Christians have taught the Church a practice of communal discernment that is carried by a commitment to radical faithfulness, wise pragmatism and trust in the Spirit at the edge of new beginnings.

Discernment in the desert

Desert dwellers were willing to pay a high price in pursuit of an experience of union with God. They pushed the limits of ascetic renunciation far beyond the imagination. Purification of body, character and mind to prepare the soul for an encounter with God, the experience of illumination, required constant discernment in terms of what would level the path or lead to distraction and deviation from finding God and only God. On the way to an experience of union with God many seekers chose to take guidance and advice from more experienced elders. Accepting guidance required humility and unconditional acceptance of another person's authority. These are two qualities not highly prized in a Western context, which values an empowerment of the individual to make his or her own choices. Discernment of the path to God was, however, not merely based on an individual body of experience. It assimilated many seekers' knowledge of purification for the sake of illumination. As a result, the first order of monastic life and the first catalogues of sins were synthesised from the experiences and practices of this community of radical renunciation. Desert dwellers teach the church about making necessary sacrifices to find the pearl of great price, about humility and persistence in the attainment of high spiritual aspirations.

Discernment in the Ignatian tradition

Ignatius is a prime example of a spiritual seeker who learned from those who went before him. His systematic collating of personal and communal discernment practices drew in large part from the literature of the desert dwellers and in doing so provided lasting impulses in the formation of the ministry of spiritual direction. Ignatius made a compelling case, firstly for the monastic community, but later also for those who lived ordinary lives outside of monasteries, that entering into a close relationship with Christ is the most important criterion for fruitful

discernment. This provided a primary grounding in Christ's love and Christ's teachings on the love of neighbour and it laid the foundations for a process of exploring the origins of desires and of where those desires were leading, the process of discernment of spirits. The discernment would lead to a sense of consolation or desolation which would either bring the seeker closer to God or create greater distance from God. Applied to a communal setting the relationship of a person with Christ becomes the story of a community with Christ. A community composed of members well versed in the practices of the prayer of examen and personal discernment engages in the same stages as the individual: sharing experiences, reflection on experiences, articulation of a question or theme, discerning the spirits related to the question or theme, decision and action. Through this process, the community experiences the formation of a shared identity, a shared story which, ideally, leads it to a common mind on an issue. Ignatius's approach teaches the wider Church, and especially those engaged in the ministry of spiritual direction, that discernment is as much about learning the relationship with Christ as it is about honing the skill of self awareness, awareness of the presence of God and examination of conscience. The fusion of the thorough investigation of how desires direct human lives with a grounding in spiritual relationships, together with the ongoing practice of self inspection and the discernment of God's presence in daily life, provides a great gift to all those persons and communities who yearn to live lives aligned with the Spirit of God.

Repentance and discernment in the Reformed tradition

From the Reformed tradition the Church receives the gift of repentance as daily practice and as foundation for discernment. The examples presented in this thesis have given evidence of the transformative power of repentance in the context of communal discernment challenges. Repentance in a communal context requires each party to reverse the attention from the others back onto the self. Whenever this reversal is performed successfully, speaking about others' shortcomings turns into revealing one's own flaws. There is a great deal of unexplored potential for the spiritual practice of repentance as part of communal discernment. I wager a guess that whenever there is unresolved conflict or the threat of division, confession and repentance in

terms of each party's own shortcomings would resolve paralysis and create movement in the right direction.

Discernment in the Wesleyan and Pietists' traditions

From the evangelical arm the Church receives a commitment to conversion experience and the involvement in growing in an authentic faith over the life span. From the fierce belief in the priesthood of all believers springs an empowerment of each person as learner and teacher of the faith. Evangelical fellowships are composed of people, each of whom is saved into a relationship with Christ, has the gift of the Spirit to read and interpret the scriptures and live a life in accordance with Christ's teachings. Although this emphasis is responsible for much division it also has the power to render powerless institutions whose structures and systems have taken on a life of their own. Evangelically grounded discernment can generate renewal of faith and practice through its abiding in an experienced faith and a living relationship with Christ.

Communal discernment in the tradition of the Quakers

The practices enshrined in the meeting for worship for business in the tradition of the Quakers teach the Church the value of a living silence in decision making. The transformative power of sitting in the Light and the belief in 'that of God' coming to the fore in the process of seeking unity in action, have been amply witnessed to in the writings of the Quakers. Worship in this tradition gives new meaning to the term 'the gathered community' because a community truly gathered in the Light is a community truly capable of being united in action. Holding on to the 'sense of the meeting' as the emergence of that unity, after a period of arguing, weighing, information gathering, is a unique feature and a unique gift of Quaker faith and practice.

Communal discernment as consensus building

The Uniting Church in Australia clearly drew from consensus models that had been developed in grassroots initiatives. Although discernment in this context does not call for the engagement in spiritual practices, it demonstrates the art of consensus building through negotiating

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compromises which is frequently needed in churches' decision making on all levels of government. A community intent on creating shared action needs to be highly skilled in working out that portion of an activity that will draw the largest support. Grassroots and community building models that often work towards high political ideals can teach the Church much about the fine art of consensus building.

Discernment and consensus in the Uniting Church in Australia

The UCA creatively adopted a consensus model of decision making and tried to integrate it into its ecclesial ethos of 'uniting', embed it into worship and equip those involved in decision making with a range of interpersonal skills that would aid the building of productive communities. The *Manual for Meeting* is itself an expression of the church's commitment to discernment in decision making. In the process the *Manual's* eclectic use of skills for community building and communication has created some inconsistencies which will require some improvements. A chapter on prayer and discernment as part of the consensus process, for example, could help alleviate some of the lack of connection between pragmatic and spiritual approaches to decision making. However, as the wider embrace of the UCA's consensus procedures has demonstrated, this Australian church leads the way in introducing practical tools to negotiate compromises that enable steps toward the unity that so often eludes the church.

Prayerful interaction in communal discernment

One of the most obvious features of this investigation is the significance of prayer in communal and personal discernment. Prayer is normally understood as a privileged form of communication with God. A person or community speaks to God and then, after the 'amen', the members of the community speak to one another. Often the tone of the two types of the conversation is rather different. One is casual, the other is formal. One is more spontaneous, the other more intentional, often pre-formulated. Exploring a variety of models of contemporary discernment has shown that prayerful listening as part of a communal discernment process tends to be extended into all conversations. Those who prayerfully weigh options and prioritise

information will also listen with heightened sensitivity to the Spirit's voice to one another. The communicative process thus becomes something of a collaborative spiritual work that takes shape in being present, listening, waiting, reflecting, consulting the scriptures, questioning choices, challenging the status quo, understanding, speaking authentically, confessing and repenting, lamenting, disclosing, deciding and acting, and the horizon of prayer is widened from speaking to God to include all human-to-human interactions.

Prayerful listening

Prayerful listening covered an inner posture of openness and a state of being present to God, self and others. I pointed out that in Matthew's gospel listening had salvific significance. In much of what has been written about discernment in the contemporary literature, prayerful listening is the entrance of the Spirit into human perception. It is in listening that faith as trust in the yet unknowable future and in the activity of the Spirit of God is exercised. The appearance of a passive posture in listening is combined with an internal alertness, an invisible high-strung vigilance which is paired with an unconditional openness to the movements of God's Spirit. Where the human heart, mind and spirit are opened to the Spirit's movement, there is a possibility – not a guarantee – for new discoveries of binding divine knowledge for the sake of faithful action. Suzanne Farnham et al. alerted the reader to the fact that listening involves the whole person in often subtle ways and that human interaction may already contain traces of the Spirit's activity. She suggested, that "[l]istening is not an exclusively auditory matter. People transmit their thoughts and feelings in many ways. To fully receive communication from God through fellow humans, we need to listen with all that we are."[504]

Listening to self is often forgotten as an asset, but is regarded as a hindrance in communal discernment, as it is judged to be a negative factor, for example in self-centredness, pride, lack of humility etc. The importance of abandoning self interest in favour of acting out personal agendas, has been recognised. However, there is a necessary self awareness, which, if absent, could disturb, even sabotage, the communal discernment process in subtle ways. Healthy self

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504   Farnham et al., *Grounded in God*, "Discernment Listening Guidelines", comment on 2, 58; see also John Ackerman, *Listening to God*, 26–27; and Farnham et al., *Listening Hearts*, 32.

awareness has long been a quality promoted in Clinical Pastoral Education and generally in the counselling branch of pastoral ministry. Frank Lake, one of the founding members of CPE made a compelling case for training the pastoral carer in self awareness which also applies to a person involved in discernment. He argued,

> Let us admit … that our disinclination to spend time listening to troubled people tells us more about our own unsolved anxieties than it does about their avowedly insoluble ones … Much of what passes for counseling of the parishioner is actually the pastor's treatment of his own anxieties … Before he has heard the story out he begins to give the sort of reassurance which the [person] recognizes cannot be meant for himself, since he has not yet come to the end of his story. The half is not yet known. Therefore it must be that the [pastor] is reassuring himself.[505]

The context of spiritual discernment, while it may bring out the best in participants, may well also come under the influence of all the pitfalls, foibles and wounds that come with each participant. Here it is worthwhile to remember the invaluable quality of self awareness, even if it is awareness of brokenness or woundedness, because, as Barry and Anne Ulanov pointed out, ego wounds can become vulnerabilities and openings through which God finds God's way into the world. [506]

The unshackled self is not suddenly perfect and whole in every respect. But because it is anchored in God it is made able to live in and out of the presence of God. There can be no doubt that the practice of prayerful listening to the self could have deep reaching consequences for the restoration of the listener towards his or her personal wholeness. Thomas Keating talks about this possibility in terms of "divine therapy", whose sole purpose it is "to enable us to become who we really are".[507] Having given the self its rightful place, prayerful listening needs no longer

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505 Frank Lake, *Clinical Theology*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966, 62. Quoted from Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray Without Ceasing. Revitalising pastoral care*. Grand Rapids, Michigan, Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006, 81.

506 Ann and Barry Ulanov, 'Prayer and Personality: Prayer as Primary Speech'. 24–33. In: Jones, Wainright, Yarnold, *The Study of Spirituality*, 1986, 29. The Ulanovs are using Carl Gustav Jung's notion of the ego as defence against and opening to the self, which is the seat of perception of the divine, amongst other things, as yet another way of speaking about the mystery of the interaction between the human and divine Spirit. This language is also commensurate with the psychologising tendencies of desert spirituality writers, such as Evagrius Ponticus and Diadochus, as Mark MacIntosh has shown. See also C.G. Jung's definition of the "Ich", in: *Psychologische Typen*. Gesammelte Werke, Sechster Band. Olten und Freiburg im Breisgau: Walter Verlag, 13. Auflage, 1978, 471.

507 Thomas Keating, *Manifesting God*. New York: Lantern Books, 2005, 93.

be disrupted by it. Then listening can take place as an availability and attentiveness of the whole person to what is unfolding in the presence of the Spirit among others. Becoming immersed into the presence of God, while listening for the Spirit in others, in the midst of attending to the "sodden earth" of our shared humanity and intentionally remaining aware of self, even the wounded self, anchored in God – these are the gifts that prayerful listening offers to the Church.

Waiting and silence

The tradition of the Quakers has most fully preserved a practice of "sitting in silence" or "sitting in the Light". This practice holds on to the creation of a relational space between humans and the divine that much like a sacrament releases the manifestation of inward grace into outward or audible words and actions. This carries an uncontrollable transformative impulse for decision making. Because there is "that of God in everyone", whatever "that" is, is actively involved in the decision making process. Resolution does not occur in every case. Barry Morley even pointed out that waiting for the sense of the Meeting to emerge as a place of unity, is increasingly the exception. However, the role of silence in decision making cannot be underestimated, especially when it is a prayerful waiting in silence.

What was introduced as "holy indifference" by Ignatius takes effect in the silent waiting on God. Arguing a person out of an attachment is rarely helpful. However, when a person is willing to sit in God's presence, sometimes the gentle pressure of the loving Spirit achieves what no human word can: a choice to let go. This signifies the Spirit's unhinging of a person from the compulsion to have one's needs met, one's convictions confirmed, or simply, to get one's own way. Arriving at holy indifference is willingly giving up control over a particular outcome and trusting that the Spirit will guide the community to a good place regardless of the outcome.

In an age where actions and outcomes are highly prized, waiting on God to bring about a solution to an unresolved problem could be mistaken as being resigned to powerlessness and inactivity. The theological validity of powerlessness as forerunner to the emergence of a way forward, is, however, presented with full force by Paul, when he proclaims Christ crucified to the

Greeks and Jews of Corinth (1 Cor. 1:23) in the foolishness of the cross. Silence as a cruciform practice, then, signifies no less than the opportunity to die to one's own partiality and to open up to God's unknown way forward. Exchanging a personal preference, lingering in sheer presence, practising a silently waiting faith, may lead to the relinquishment of human agency and to letting go of knowing the way forward. When through silent waiting constraining agendas have been laid down and 'being in the Light' has become the sole purpose for sitting quietly, transformative moments in communal discernment are becoming a real possibility. A discerning community that has come to a place where it cannot see any way forward has no better place to go than to wait and dwell in the transformative presence of God and to let it do the unifying work.

Speaking

I have addressed prayerful presence, listening and waiting in silence first, because these practices constitute the foundation for speaking as spiritual practice. The literature on spiritual discernment often overlooks speaking or responding as spiritual practice in the communal context. In early Quaker practice, rising to speak was a special privilege and needed to be initiated by a sense of inspiration. Speaking was understood as "verbal ministry". In many Christian denominations respect for the spiritual significance of the spoken word outside of the pulpit has, however, not been maintained. In the Protestant tradition the spoken word is given primary theological concern in the realm of preaching but rarely in the realm of discernment and decision making.

The Uniting Church's *Manual for Meeting* contains a lengthy section on community building recognising the pivotal role good communication plays in the process of decision making and discernment. The use of Carl Rogers' criteria for establishing well working relationships focused on genuineness, non-possessive love and empathy. The reflective feedback that followed the accurate perception of the other's world of experience played a critical part in the successful enactment of empathy and the achievement of genuine understanding. Without knowing what another person has understood or perceived of me, understanding remains necessarily vague. As Rogers put it, "empathy is in itself a healing agent. It is one of the most potent aspects of therapy,

because it releases, it confirms, it brings even the most frightened client into the human race. If a person is understood, he or she belongs."[508] It goes without saying that, for Rogers, empathy is only doing the work of creating belonging when it is practised in both of its basic elements, perception/immersion and reflection. For the process of building a discerning community empathy can only be an effective factor when reflective speech is practised alongside disclosive speech. If speaking is conceived of as a spiritual practice, the act of disclosing personal thoughts is placed under the same stipulations as prayerful listening. It is treated as a conduit for the work of the Spirit.

Reflective, re-creative and disclosive speaking

Reflective responding as a spiritual practice does not ask for mechanical parroting by one person of what another person has said. It falls more into the category of paraphrasing or summarising. When done well it entails a sober, accurate communication of what has been heard, felt, and observed for the benefit of creating understanding. Reflecting does not call for an exact replication, it calls for a *re-creation* of a person's reality in the words of one's own world of experience, feeling, thinking and perceiving. Without such reflective, re-creative practice of speaking, the reality of a community's state of relationships remains 'under cover', thus casting a shadow of vagueness and the potential for much misconception and misunderstanding over all interactions.

On the surface, reflective responding recreates the reality of another person in terms of the content and the emotional aspect of what has been shared. A person thus feels understood when she or he is heard and seen in terms of a position or a personal issue. At its deepest level, however, reflective, re-creative responding honours the other as a place of Christ's indwelling through the Spirit and another's words as possible icons or glimpses of that divine presence. Reflective responding not only acknowledges that a person may be at home within themselves, but that they are at home with Christ and in tune with the Spirit. In this sense re-creative reflection can be understood as yet another expression of prayerful communication whose desired outcome

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508   Carl Rogers, *A Way of Being*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980, 129. Quoted in: Egan, The Skilled Helper, 124.

is to enable the experience of being truly understood. Re-creative reflection could be regarded as a searching and aiming for that divine life that lingers in and between worded speech and pauses, hinting towards that spiritual relationship that unfolds between a person and the Divine presence. Viewed from this trajectory, understanding is not primarily the sense that someone has accurately duplicated a facet of another person's world of experience, but that someone through re-creative reflection touched that sacred interactive space between God and another that gives a person their ultimate sense of identity. As a result, re-creative reflection has the potential to facilitate the kind of understanding that may lead from a fragmented and partial connection to a person feeling deeply recognised, received and accepted, the kind of understanding that could be experienced as communion. The connections that emerge from this quality of understanding have the potential to bring to light what is most deeply precious and authentic about a person and their identity in God. When such re-creative reflection is effective it makes room for moments of deep peace, for knowing and being known between speaker and listener, a sacred stillness, a joy of arrival and fulfilment at the deepest point of human-divine and human-to-human interaction. From such a moment of communion, healing, reconciliation and new horizons for a community's understanding of its faith and actions can arise.

Authentic disclosure of thoughts or disclosive speech refers to sharing any material that is deemed to be relevant to a matter to be discerned. Truthfulness and gentleness in disclosure help to open up the channels of fruitful relating because participants who witness and receive such disclosure are inspired to do the same. This can itself be a challenging practice as it requires of the speaker to sift through and weigh in her or his own mind the material that could be communicated and make determinations as to what may or may not be of use. The disclosure of originally discarded material can, however, also be a place for new discoveries. Being spiritually attuned to the question or task at hand, to the Spirit at work, to the whispers of the inner self and the positions of others are part and parcel of the complex and demanding context of authentic disclosure. The tradition of the Friends have demonstrated a considered knowledge and practice of 'rising to speak', or 'vocal ministry' which provides valuable learning in this area for the Church.

Cathartic speaking and lamentation

In a process of communal discernment the liturgical or individual externalisation of unbearable suffering, frustration and anger can facilitate a similar type of relief and repair, as does reflective-recreative speech, especially when the expression of pain is directed towards God and held in that relationship. Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane presented an example for cathartic speaking and lamentation. When directed towards other participants it can destroy trust among the community as a whole and personal relationships may be seriously damaged. If it is facilitated in the context of prayerful speech and prayerful listening, followed up by reflective and re-creative empathic responding, it could help to shift a community in stagnation to a new place of discovering faith in a loving, steadfast and trustworthy God. From such a discovery the community could move to a new place of trust towards one another. Externalising pain and suffering, anger and frustration as a God-directed practice could relieve the discerning community from much anxiety about negative emotions which tend to reside in everyone at one time or another. The gift of genuine lamentation is the embrace of so-called negative emotions as a source for learning and a force towards change.

Conclusion

Authentic communal discerning experiences arise from an interactive field, participants in the process open themselves up to the actuality of God's presence and the Spirit's direction for a specific aspect of life. Sometimes a community has to bear lingering in a state of an open-not-knowing until from the Spirit a new direction is perceived that changes the state of not knowing to a state of tentative clarity. My intention has been draw attention to this relational space where visible and invisible, human and divine persons encounter one another and interact. It is one of the mysteries of faith, both personal and communal, that it would be possible to take direction from the mouth of God through the mouths of others, if one has ears to hear, a heart ready to receive and a mind capable of interpreting what has been heard toward faithful action. It seems to me that one of the most suitable images to describe this interactive discerning

space is as a "sacred estuary".[509] I have come to believe that mapping these relational skills and processes can provide the Church with a tentative description to this sacred space. Pathways through discernment help to facilitate a movement from the usual adversarial diversity, the mere tolerance of difference or sheer indifference among those making decisions together, to a new state as Paul put it, of embodying Christ *together*. The notion that human interactions can be an arena for God's self-disclosure sheds a new light on the need to attend to the skills and attitudes that turn human interaction into a sacred practice. Why is this of significance? Because, as Diana Butler Bass once wrote, "practice might not make perfect, but it does appear to make pilgrims".[510] Pilgrims embark on life as a sacred journey. They visit sacred sites and hone their spiritual perception. But they also live lives in service of others, travelling lightly in terms of worldly goods, busy careers and a need to see a return for their efforts. So in practising prayerful listening, silence, waiting, presence, recreative-responding, discerning motives and waiting on the Spirit, pilgrims have their eyes firmly set on a discerning life whose reward consists in travelling with Christ and with other companions. When interaction becomes a possible site for divine revelation, each instance of interaction becomes infinitely important, thus, each interaction counts, particularly within the context of a communal discernment journey. This is why interaction as spiritual practice can be a life changing way of relating. Each time, a person knows themselves truly understood, recognised and accepted, there is a 'Reign-of-God' moment. And each time loving a neighbour is realised in a moment of true encounter, Christ is present to those who experience it. So, even if these microskills in communal discernment happen one sentence, one eye contact, one moment of being fully present to the other or to God at a time, they represent the blade of grass sprouting up from under the bitumen, the defiance of divine love that begins underground.

The Spirit as the third person of the Divine Communion actualises God's involvement in the concrete personal and communal reality of the life of the Church. When participants of

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509   Gary Gunderson alerted me to the use of the term "estuary" in a leadership context. In chapter 2 of his book *Boundary Leaders, Leadership Skills for People of Faith,* he describes a boundary as "the edge of things" and boundary leaders as people who are able to keep "their eyes on the fluid zones between them and around them". He goes on to characterise boundary leaders as thinking "of their community as kind of estuary in which salt water and fresh water mingle". (23) His use of the term "estuary" as metaphor for the types of confluences that exist in communities and in leaders' internal dialogue prompted me to apply it to the human/divine sphere of encounter during the discernment process. I will again return to Gunderson's concepts at the point of describing the formational challenges for a person leading a community in a discernment process.

510   Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation,* 66.

a discerning community commit to the sacred sensitivity that makes perceiving the Spirit's impulses possible, then discerning, even tentatively, an outcome for the life of the community that is aligned with its vocation is also possible.

The presence of God's Realm of Communion glows through the crevasses of human life which open further through the practice of prayerful waiting, listening, responding, understanding and deciding. The communion that potentially arises among those who participate in the search for a way forward with one another and who partake in the work of the Spirit is a special gift which needs to be expected and claimed more often. When this is done, the Church's decisions and its decision making processes can themselves become icons of God's presence. Then it is clear that discernment in decision making is not optional for the life of the Church, but a call essential to find new life in faith, service and mission.

> *O breath of love, come breathe within us,*
> *Renewing thought and will and heart*
> *Come, love of Christ afresh to win us,*
> *Revive your church in every part.*
>
> > (Elizabeth Porter Head, 1850–1936)

Epilogue

Record of a Journey

One night
we step together
on the ancient bridge

We cannot see ahead
dark air calms down
our hectic heart beats
the eyes begin to see darkness
the ears begin to hear darkness
the skin begins to feel darkness

The bridge has ended
We are coming to a halt
we don't know where we are

ahead
great silence
welcomes us

Our minds are still playing
many programs
noisy commentators …
"I wish we'd stayed home …"
"This is just a waste of time …"
"It's too dark"
"It's too cold"
"I've got work to do!"
"Hey, watch where you step …"
"I don't believe we'll find anything …"
"Can't you be quiet for a minute?!"

Eventually we stop listening
and finally
the noisy commentators
fade away

We shudder
as the quiet
begins to nest
in our hearts

We wait
our hearts
new moon shaped sickles
slowly swelling in expectation

Time stretches
then dissolves

Our minds are preying
ready to spear
that fleeting whisper
trying to reach us
through the crevasse
between dream and wake

our prayer is silence
and waiting
with greater and greater patience

There!
a filigree flake of light
dances towards us
on the soundless breath of darkness
we try to grasp it
in vain

the rush
to grasp subsides
silence arrives
in the recesses
of our wanting

In a moment
without yearning
we receive

The glory of God's presence
echoes through
the craters of our beings
the sound of Sheer Silence
pours into our hollow spirit spaces

precious silence
soaked with mercy
inexhaustible love
252

seeping into darkness
and affliction

awakening tenderness
with promises of being held
belonging
being known
and knowing …

Our wastelands sigh and bloom

Much later we turn back
holding on to one another
we step off the bridge
Slowly walking towards home
as one

Baptised with new life
humble, glad and tired
we don't know everything

Just that flicker of new life
that gave itself in silence
and left its imprint on our lives

radiating in God's glory
some have no name for it
some give it names

Then we light a fire
we break a blessed loaf
and share a blessed cup

we dance the journey
feast and praise
and share the treasure
with anyone who passes by …

APPENDIX 1

**The Manual for Meetings of the Uniting Church in Australia
1996/1999 edition**

A Manual for Meetings in the Uniting Church

Contents

INTRODUCTION

The National Assembly of the Uniting Church commends this Manual for use in all councils of the church – in congregations, parishes, presbyteries, synods, and of course in the Assembly.

The Manual replaces the previous Standing Orders and Rules of Debate which have always been published as part of the Constitution and Regulations of the church. From 1996 onwards the Manual will be included in the Constitution and Regulations.

The Manual is a most important development in the life of the Uniting Church. Our former meeting procedures were based on a parliamentary system of debate, often leading to an adversarial style of meeting. That style is occasionally appropriate within the Christian community, but church meetings are meant to be far more than motions, amendments and debates. Church meetings are about
– listening to one another,
– seeking mutual solutions,
– working together on a shared hope or difficulty,
– building community,
  and above all about
– seeking the will of God for the church.

The Manual seeks to provide procedures for church councils to meet in ways which fulfil those aims. It will make a big difference to how Uniting Church members meet together and make decisions – to how we do things. I expect the Manual will make a large contribution to the 'ethos' of the church.

Note that the first four chapters are vital to understanding the procedures which are detailed in the last three chapters. I hope that church members come to know and understand the Christian principles and concepts described in the earlier chapters just as well as they know and use the new meeting procedures which follow.

The Assembly thanks the members of the Melbourne-based task group who worked on this Manual from 1989 to 1994, and especially its chairperson, John Rowland. Thanks are also due to Jill Tabart, who as President of the Seventh Assembly showed us with grace and firmness how the Manual can transform our meetings.

A review of the Manual will take place in 1997, when refinements will no doubt be made in the light of experience.

Gregor Henderson
Assembly General Secretary
Lent 1995

I. MEETING TOGETHER

Chapter 1
The formation of community

1.1   Seeking to discern the Spirit

When a council of the church makes decisions it is aiming to discern the guidance of the Spirit in response to the word of God. This is both a noble and bold objective but it may be difficult to determine whether or not it has been achieved in regard to a particular decision. In retrospect, some decisions are visionary and innovative, others inappropriate and destructive, whether or not they were seen that way at the time.

It is important to recognise that the processes we use to create community and communicate in our meetings can, themselves, be vehicles for expressing the will of God. They will be enhanced greatly if people are open both to the Spirit and to each other. By creating and sustaining effective communications in the context of a Christian community we will be more likely to discern the Spirit and reflect the will of God in our decision-making.

This is not to say that community should be 'nice' all the time. Rather it involves openness and honesty leading to joy, but also struggling through pain and difficulty together, being unified in our brokenness and our common identity under God. Even within an effectively established community, mistakes will occur. These can be attributed to our imperfect humanity, and need to be acknowledged. If community members are left hurt or the community is broken, poor decisions are likely to be made, and the church has failed to be true community. Pressure to make a decision while ignoring the hurt of some members is likely to lead to poor decisions.

1.2   Christian community in decision making

A Christian community is formed when members of a group discern the life they share in Christ. A community is strengthened as the members are open and supportive to each other in pursuit of the ideals and practices around which the group is formed. In the Uniting Church the local congregation is the primary expression of such a community as it gathers under the word of God for worship, fellowship and service. Biblical images such as the body of Christ inform our expectations of how members should relate and then express the purpose of their gathering through the ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The councils of the church in congregations, parishes, presbyteries, synods or the Assembly, are expressions of community, being made up of congregational members and formed for specific purposes in the overall life of the church. An implicit premise of this document is that the communal nature of the relationship expressed in the Trinity, and re-expressed in the body of Christ, determines both the agenda for the life of the church and the processes through which that agenda is to be pursued.

1.3 The concept of Christian community in the *Basis of Union*

The ***Basis of Union*** is rich with imagery which supports the concept of Christian community as foundational to the polity of the Uniting Church in Australia:

Paragraph 3: … The Church's call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself …

Paragraph 7: … Baptism into Christ's body initiates people into Christ's life and mission in the world, so that they are united in one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy, in one family of the Father of all in heaven and earth, and in the power of the one Spirit …

Paragraph 15: … The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ alone is supreme in his Church, and that he may speak to it through any of its councils. It is the task of every council to wait upon God's Word, and to obey God's will in the matters allocated to its oversight …

1.4 Building a sense of community

The church is a community formed and sustained by the Spirit of God. Community-building activities for the church start with the acknowledgement of the headship of Christ and the individuals' membership together with Christ. Gathering and affirming the church as a community of faith has traditionally been through the worship of God, formal and informal. The sense of belonging to a group is further enhanced when there is an opportunity for the members to share their personal experiences about belonging to the group. Within this context of worship and belonging, the work of a community group needs to encompass the conscious decision to develop an effective group. To be fully effective, a group needs to have the following elements:
- a clear and co-operative approach to goal setting and working;
- accurate two-way communication among all members;
- widespread distribution of participation and leadership among group members;
- a way of reaching solutions and decisions with the support of as many members as possible;
- power and influence based on expertise and access to information and social skills, not on authority;
- the frequent occurrence of controversy;
- open confrontation and negotiation of conflict of interests among members, and between group members and the chairperson or co-ordinator or facilitator;
- a high level of cohesiveness in the group;
- a high level of trust among members;
- a climate of acceptance and support among members and between group members and the chairperson or co-ordinator or facilitator;
- group standards which promote individual responsibility and accountability, helping and sharing, and the achievement of group goals; and
- the development of group and interpersonal skills among members, and a commitment to maintaining these skills.

The nature of a group will depend on its reason for existence and on its meeting program. The interaction between members, and the styles of operation, will differ between those groups which come together over a limited period of time to achieve specific objectives and those which have a longer and often indefinite life.

1.5   Making time for building community

The task of establishing community does take time. Overall, however, time will be saved in the process of making decisions. As a guideline, it is suggested that 20% of the time available be allocated for worship and community building activities.

When a group meets only for a short time, as in a council such as the Assembly or a synod, members must be enabled to find ways to form and sustain community rapidly, and to overcome the difficulties associated with forming a working relationship with those who are initially strangers.

When a group is formed to have a life which may continue for some time (months or years), the sense of community is likely to build more slowly, and develop as people work together on a common task. It may be possible to arrange specific acts or events which will facilitate the building of the group, either in the introductory meetings or as a separate function.

1.6   Maintenance and constant rebuilding of community

Having established a community group, there is no guarantee that it will continue without further support and learning among its members. There may be new members who arrive to replace former members who are leaving, and every time the members come together, even after a few days, events have happened which have changed the lives of individuals and which will change the way those individuals now relate to the group. In order to maintain a sense of community, it is helpful for members to be able to appreciate these changes.

For a group which meets over a limited time, many of the changes will relate directly to the work being undertaken, although external events can and do play a vital role in shaping attitudes and reactions. In order to maintain a sense of community there needs to be time to share some of the changes which may have taken place, and to continue to develop new relationships. When groups have a much longer existence, and retain a membership over some months or years, the sense of community is built on continuing work and relationships, but nevertheless needs sustenance in order to ensure that those meeting together are able to appreciate changes which may affect the whole group.

To help in this maintenance and re-building process, there are some skills we can utilise. They assist our interpersonal relationships, and thus help integration of new members and ensure we do not become ignorant of other members' changing situations and needs.

1.7   Skills used in building communication

Listening skills: These help us to understand what another person is saying, and to develop new ways of responding. A key result of the use of careful listening is that members are helped to feel that their problems and feelings have been understood. When good listening skills are used appropriately, members are often enabled to solve their own problems, or are encouraged to contribute their own ideas to the group, without becoming dependent on others.

Assertion skills: These verbal and non-verbal behaviour skills enable us to maintain respect, satisfy our own needs, and to defend our rights and points of view without becoming dominating, manipulative, abusing, or controlling of others.

Conflict-resolution skills: These abilities enable us to deal with the emotional turbulence that typically accompanies conflict. They are likely to foster closer relationships when the conflict is over.

Collaborative problem-solving skills: These skills help to resolve conflicting needs in such a way that all parties are satisfied. Solving problems in a collaborative manner helps to ensure that the solutions found are accepted by everyone and will continue to be acceptable.

1.8   Skills used in building relationships

Developing and using good communication skills by themselves is not sufficient. We need three key qualities in our relationships:

Genuineness – being honest and open about our own feelings, needs, and ideas;

Non-possessive love – accepting, respecting and supporting other people in a way which accepts them as equals and frees them to contribute as important individuals;

Empathy – the ability to see and hear another person and understand that person's perspective or point of view.

Good communication flows out of basic attitudes as well as through specific methods and techniques. Techniques help specific situations and must be appropriate to that situation, but if we have not developed genuineness, love, and empathy, our technique is irrelevant or even harmful.

1.9   In times of stress

Every group goes through periods of stress in its life, and there are important pointers to remind us to check our maintenance and re-building tasks. Some of these stress points include the following:

Times for leadership changes: When a group is new, or a new task is accepted, leadership is usually given by someone who is strongly motivated to get the job done. After establishment, or when the task is well under way, different leadership skills are needed. Rather than task-oriented leadership, the group now needs group maintenance leadership.

The stagnation blues: Sometimes this results from personal boredom, and is an indicator that it is the people who need a change, not the group. Perhaps the group goals have changed, but the means of achieving the new goals are still the old and inappropriate. This may be a sign of inflexibility in group members, or insecurity about taking up new ideas. It may be helpful to plan a workshop to reassess future goals and help members to assess their own personal roles within the group.

The sunset clause: When it is time to finish, finish. Not all groups have a continuing life and it is better to finish on a high note with a task completed than to look about for a reason to continue because the fellowship has been good. The good feeling among the members can be killed by an attempt to continue to work in a task-oriented way once the task no longer exists. If appropriate, end the task-oriented group and start, or join in with, an appropriate fellowship-oriented group.

Planning ahead: Try to have a plan for the year's activities. The goals of the group will dictate the type of plan necessary. A sure way to encourage boredom is an agenda that is full of *Business arising* and empty of *New proposals.*

Changeover times: Good hand-over procedures ensure that important records do not get lost, and that incoming members and office bearers understand the history of the group and can better appreciate the reasoning behind decisions already made. A good forward plan helps the changeover time and ensures past decisions are not forgotten.

Chapter 2
Why we meet together

2.1   Stating and clarifying our objectives as a community

For any community endeavouring to reach a decision, it is important that its members are clear about its objective and purpose. A chairperson should never hesitate to ensure this. If the community has developed plans together, is confident in its personal relationships and individual communication skills, then stating and clarifying objectives will be made easy.

An agenda should provide a clearly understood list of signposts in order that the objective for this meeting can be achieved. The emphasis is on signposts, not immutable ruts on a dry dusty track. Although the secretary and chairperson of any meeting have prime responsibility for drafting an agenda, the meeting itself needs to accept its agenda. Nevertheless, it is important that there be provision to change direction, to add new issues, and to re-order priorities as the flow of discussion and discovery demands. This flexibility can be daunting for any chairperson, yet it ensures that there is provision to respect the needs and wishes of the community. After all, it is the whole community which is endeavouring to achieve the objectives.

It is a helpful practice, after the meeting is opened and the common purpose has been established, for the chairperson to invite the meeting to review its agenda before work commences. Signposts seen from a distance are better than barbed-wire fences encountered halfway along the track.

2.2   The act of sharing together

If the meeting is to be effective, the chairperson and all those attending need to agree on the purpose and on the ways in which that purpose will be achieved.

If it is to welcome, then let us welcome and celebrate together. If it is to be informed, then let us learn and explore ideas and concepts together, and be enthused by the enthusiasm of others. If it is to develop new paths, then let us listen, struggle, devise and refine together. If it is to share a cup of tea, then let us drink together.

Despite the instinctive response by many people that the reason for going to a meeting is to make decisions, in reality the act of making a decision is often one which consumes the least amount of time.

The facilitating role of the chairperson is to endeavour to recognise the needs of the group and of its members, and so to guide the meeting to allow those needs to be met.

Chapter 3
How we meet together

It is essential that we have procedures which will help us meet together in different ways. A formal debating style is not appropriate for an act of worship, for example. We have always recognised the need for different procedures such as liturgy for worship, and rules of debate for meetings. However, we have sometimes made the assumption that the only appropriate style for a church meeting is one which proceeds by way of resolution, discussion and voting.

This section, then, presents suggestions for several different types of sessions. The models include comments about when each might be helpful, and indicate some guidelines for their operation.

Procedures for use within the various types of sessions should be recommended by the organising committee or those responsible for the agenda and other procedural arrangements. Procedures for a decision session can be found later in this manual.

A group may meet in the following types of session:
- worship;
- general session;
- information session;
- deliberative session; or
- decision session.

3.1   Worship

Worship is a vital element in meetings of any council of the church. Regardless of the reasons for meeting, we are called to recognise whose we are. While in some cases worship is an event which

stands alone, there is a place for worship during every gathering of a church council. Groups should consider how and when to include worship in each session.

3.2   General session

General sessions include ceremonial occasions, formal addresses, opening and closing ceremonies, celebrations, public meetings, and other sessions where a specific and fixed agenda is appropriate. During sessions of this nature the chairperson has responsibility for the agenda, and new business may not be introduced, except by consent of the members present.

3.3   Information session

Information sessions provide an opportunity to share information in order to present reports and issues, and an opportunity for the council to discuss such information. In many cases the information presented forms the basis for subsequent deliberative or decision sessions, or for the development of policies or strategies for future action.

During information sessions, particular speakers, representing reporting bodies or as individuals, are allocated a period of time by the organising committee, and this time may be used in any agreed way to present the issue and to outline suggested desirable outcomes. Questions for clarification may be received from members of the council, and responses or comments from members are also allowed.

The chairperson moderates the session, and may allow multiple questions or comments if time and fairness permit. The organising committee recommends procedures and a timetable for the session, and may provide opportunity for a range of activities including, for example, plenary discussion, small groups, short speeches, special presentations such as audio-visuals, drama or specialist speakers, and opinion gathering.

No motions or recommendations pertaining to the issues raised should be considered by the group during an information session.

3.4   Deliberative session

A deliberative session provides the opportunity for the group to discuss issues arising from the information sessions. Proposals for the development of policy or the resolution of particular issues are developed in deliberative sessions. The initial formulation of motions, or, in many cases, the refinement of proposals developed by presenters, can be undertaken at this time, in order to benefit from the gathered wisdom of the council.

Both plenary and subgroup activities may be used. Depending on the size and needs of the group the style of discussion may range from formal to informal. Small group participation is encouraged when an item of major significance is under consideration, in order to ensure that as many people as possible contribute to the group's deliberation. For one example of how small groups may contribute to the decision-making process, see the Appendix.

While the group does not take decisions during a deliberative session, there is a clear requirement that the result of the session is a clarification of the issues, and a move towards development of particular recommendations. Suggestions and variants about such recommendations are referred to a steering or drafting committee at the conclusion of the session. This committee, in association with other groups such as the group responsible for raising the issue or the appropriate legal or technical advisers, ensures the competence of the final recommendations to be brought to the group for decision.

During the development of proposals the chairperson is able to accept suggestions for alternatives, and to take such action as is felt appropriate to determine the attitude of the group to particular suggestions. Any of the models for decision-making may be used during a deliberative session to assist in such clarifications, but no decisions are regarded as being of other than an indicative nature.

3.5   Decision session

One of the earliest points to be clarified in the life of a group is the way in which the decisions are to be made. Unless a model has been established in some other way, such as through a previous policy decision or regulation, it is helpful for the chairperson to raise this question explicitly, and to seek agreement that all feel able to work together under this model.

A group may choose one or more of the following options:
- consensus;
- executive committee or small group delegation;
- designated leader;
- designated authority or expert consultant; or
- formal majority.

These options are detailed in the following chapter.

Chapter 4
How we make decisions

4.1   Consensus

As we meet we are conscious that we are seeking the will of God, and that we need to work together to discern the guidance of the Spirit. While there are times when a clear decision between two alternatives may be sought by majority vote, there are many situations in which that approach is not appropriate. Consensus is a process by which a common mind of the meeting is sought.

Reaching a decision by consensus takes account of the insights of each member and allows for specialised or sectional interests. Decisions are taken, not simply because 51% of members are in favour of a proposal, but because all agree to a way forward.

Considerable responsibility is placed on the chairperson to be sensitive to the mood of the meeting. It is frequently necessary to seek to summarise or extract partial decisions. By feeding these back to the group it is often possible to make progress through a series of small steps, rather than deferring all decisions to the end of the process.

At the same time, members of the group must feel empowered to make their attitudes known, and to raise issues about which they are not yet convinced or have different attitudes from those already expressed. At some point it is necessary for the chairperson to state explicitly what appears to be the common mind of the group, and to listen and watch carefully for signs of dissent. In the absence of such signs the chairperson may assume that the required consensus has been reached, but that assumption should still be tested.

At the start of this process neither the full scope of the issue nor the likely outcomes may be clear. During discussion a course of action is developed, and this eventually becomes the consensus decision.

As a consequence, recording can be difficult unless there is careful attention to the points at which the chairperson is seen to test the feeling of the group. It is essential, once a consensus is reached, that a statement of the decision is recorded and agreed to by the members present. Usually this recording occurs during the meeting and is used as part of the checking for consensus with the group, to ensure that all relevant details have been captured. Further details of the consensus process are found in Chapter 6, Making decisions by consensus.

4.2   Executive committee or small group delegation

The style of decision-making which is based on these models is suitable for a large group which needs to refer consideration of detail, or the finalisation of issues already raised, to a group empowered to take final decisions and to act on behalf of the large group. Consequently, the style of the original meeting is not really the issue here. Referrals to a small group can happen during any type of meeting, and can arise through suggestions or recommendations made in meetings held under any of the suggested models.

It is essential that the council referring the decision to the smaller group is clear about what powers are being conferred. It must be clear, for example, that the small group has the power to make a final and irrevocable decision, if that is what is intended, or, alternatively, that it is simply being asked to prepare a recommendation or report for the larger council at a later meeting.

4.3   Designated leader

Referral of a matter to a designated leader is an alternative to the use of an executive committee or other designated group, and may be appropriate in cases where particular expertise is required, or where there are aspects of the issue which mean that privacy or confidentiality are essential. As with any decision taken on behalf of a council by some other group or person, provision should be made for adequate reporting back to the larger community of decisions taken and actions initiated.

4.4　Designated authority or expert consultant

A council may use these models of decision-making when there are particular issues of a legal, technical or expert nature which are beyond the competence of the council as a whole.

In some cases the referral to such a group will take place immediately following a deliberative session, especially when it is clear from the nature of the issue that a final decision will not be possible within the council. In other cases this may become apparent only later in a decision-making process which is using another model.

As with the executive committee model discussed previously, the actual terms of the referral must be clearly established and understood, and the council must be prepared to be bound by the decision taken by the designated group if that is the basis of the referral.

Because this type of action will often involve passing the responsibility to experts or authorities who are not members of the original council, and who may not be aware of the whole background to the questions to be resolved, the preparation of an adequate brief is essential. This should provide as much background material as is necessary, and guidelines or particular requirements which must be satisfied.

4.5　Formal majority

In many situations after the presentation of a report, the clarification of issues, and the development and refinement of proposals, there will still be a need to make decisions by determining the numbers of members in favour of, or opposed to, the recommendations developed. In such cases the process of determining a formal majority may be appropriate.

Through the use of information and deliberative sessions, the council has had an opportunity to review and develop alternatives, and the members have had opportunity to discuss the issue from many points of view. When formal majority procedures are being used, however, it is necessary to impose more strict requirements in terms of procedure. In particular, the assumption underlying the process is that it is possible to agree or disagree with the proposal before the council, and that members can be expected to take one of these positions.

When the development of the proposal has involved opportunity for general discussion, it is helpful to limit the formal majority procedures in some way. For this reason, limits are placed on the length of speeches, on the freedom of members to speak more than once, and on the introduction of new material. The text of the proposal needs to be available to all members in order that there is no doubt about the details of the issue to be decided.

In order that the council may be clear on the arguments for and against the proposal, speakers may address the issues and present material to assist members to see the advantages or disadvantages of a particular decision. The chairperson may select speakers for and against the proposal alternately if this is likely to be helpful to the council. Provision is made for alternatives through a process of amendment, giving members the ability to indicate formally a preference for a previously advised alternative to the initial proposal. If a majority do indicate that the alternative is preferred, this

replaces the original proposal. When such amendments are presented they will be discussed and decided one at a time before final debate and decision of the issue.

Voting is by a method to be agreed by the council on the recommendation of the organising committee, and may be by voices, by show of hands or voting cards, or by written ballot. Further details of the formal majority process can be found in Chapter 7, *Making decisions by formal majority.*

4.6   Chairperson's Role

The procedures in this Manual make many demands on the chairperson. It is essential that the chairperson has a thorough knowledge of the whole of the Manual, including the understandings detailed in Chapters 1 and 2 which underpin the procedures.

The chairperson's role can be summarised as presiding over the meeting of the council in a manner which assists the council to discern and to follow the will of God and to meet the needs and purposes of the council and its members.

The chairperson has considerable discretion under these procedures, including:
- reminding the council of its responsibilities and powers and the purpose of that particular meeting;
- inviting the council to review its agenda;
- checking that council members agree to work together on a particular model of decision-making;
- deciding on the method of voting;
- seeking indications of response to speeches and advising the council of those indications;
- summarising the main themes of the discussion and suggesting a particular focus for the next stage of the discussion;
- posing questions to check if consensus or agreement has been reached (sample questions in chapter 6, paragraphs 6.7 and 6.11);
- calling speakers alternately for and against the proposal;
- calling for brief times of prayer or reflective silence;
- ruling on matters of procedure;
- seeking decisions step by step rather than only at the end of the consensus procedures;
- assessing whether it is time for the council to consider moving from one method of decision-making to another.

The chairperson needs therefore to follow closely the content of the council's discussion as well as to preside over the process of discussion.

II. PROCEDURES

Chapter 5
Guidelines for meeting procedures

5.1 Definitions

In these procedures:

Assembly means the Assembly of the Church;

Chair means the position of presiding at a session;

Chairperson means the person presiding at the session of the council;

Church means the Uniting Church in Australia;

Consensus means a decision of the council reached by a unanimous decision, or where a small minority of members of the council is willing to set aside its objections to a proposal in order that the council may determine the matter;

Council means the Assembly, a Synod, a Presbytery, a Parish Meeting, a Parish Elders Council, a Parish Council, a Meeting of a Congregation or a Council of Elders;

Leave of the council means permission granted by the council, meeting in session, by a three-fourths majority vote or by such other majority as may be specified by the council;

Meeting means the gathering of the council over one or more sessions to consider those items of business comprising its agenda;

Member means a person who is authorised to participate in the activities and decisions of the council;

Session means the time from the commencement of a sitting until the following end-of-day or meal-time break.

5.2 Commencement

At the time at which any session has been convened to commence, or at the time to which any session may have been adjourned, the meeting shall commence with prayer or another form of worship.

5.3 Quorum

After the opening worship, the chairperson shall ascertain that the prescribed quorum is present.

5.4 Acknowledgement of the chairperson

All persons present shall at all times pay respect to any directions or requests from the chairperson. When the chairperson stands, all those present shall resume their seats and remain silent so that the chairperson may be heard without interruption.

5.5 Chairperson to call the business

At the commencement of each session, the chairperson shall ensure that members are informed of the nature of the session, and of the style of procedures to be used for making decisions.

The chairperson shall call for business to be considered by the council.

5.6 Members wishing to speak

A member seeking to speak shall indicate by standing or by other means signified by the chairperson, but may not speak until called by the chairperson.

No member may interrupt a speaker except to raise a point of order.

A member speaking to the council shall address the chairperson only.

5.7 Vacating the chair

If the chairperson chooses to take a partisan role in the deliberations of the council, the person authorised to act in the absence of the chairperson shall preside during consideration of the issue.

5.8 Business Committee

The council may appoint a Business Committee comprising the secretary and such other persons as the council may decide. That committee shall consider the business to come before the council and recommend the order in which business should be considered. It shall also make a recommendation concerning the procedures to be used for making decisions for each item of business. The committee may bring recommendations on any other matter relating to the effective consideration of the business. If the council does not appoint a Business Committee, the secretary shall undertake the relevant duties.

5.9 Business to be submitted

Any issue for consideration by the council, including any report or recommendation, shall be submitted in writing, over the signature of at least two members of the council, to the Business Committee of the council, unless otherwise agreed by the council, and as far as possible shall be distributed to members at least 24 hours before the time at which it is to be considered. Leave of the council is required if an issue for decision is to be dealt with within less than 24 hours of being distributed to members.

5.10   Submissions to be taken as read

All reports and recommendations shall be deemed to have been read by the members of the council. However, the member presenting the report or recommendation has the right to speak in presenting it to the council.

5.11   Questions and reception of reports

When a report has been presented to the council, any member may ask a question concerning the material presented. The chairperson may ask the presenter to respond, or rule that the question be addressed in some other manner. A proposal for the reception of the report shall be deemed to be implicit in the presentation of the report, and following questions the chairperson shall seek the agreement of the council to that motion. Reception of a report shall not imply endorsement of any suggested changes of policy contained therein, and any such changes shall be subject to the adoption of appropriate recommendations.

5.12   Length of speeches

Unless otherwise predetermined by the council, the member presenting an issue, a report or a recommendation shall speak for no more than five minutes, and subsequent speakers shall speak for no more than three minutes for each speech. Leave of the council may be sought for an extension of time.

5.13   Voting procedures

1.   Only those council members present at the meeting of the council may vote. There is no provision for voting by proxy, because of the Church's understanding that God's will is discerned as Christians listen, discuss and pray together at the meeting.

2.   Prior to calling for any vote, the chairperson shall ensure that all members are clear about the wording of the issue about which the vote is to be taken.

3.   Unless the method of voting has been previously determined by the council, the chairperson shall decide whether voting shall be on the voices, by show of hands, or by showing voting cards (preferably orange for yes and blue for no – these colours are readily distinguishable even to those who are colour-blind).

4.   If the voting is on the voices, the chairperson shall call first for those who desire that the motion shall pass to say 'yes', and then those who are opposed to the motion to say 'no'. If the voting is by show of hands the chairperson shall call for an indication by a raised hand of those who desire that the motion shall pass, and then those who are opposed to the motion. If the voting is by showing voting cards, the chairperson shall first call for orange cards to be held up to indicate support for the motion, then for blue cards to be held up to indicate opposition to the motion.

5.	The chairperson shall then declare whether the motion is carried or lost and if there is no dissenting voice the result shall be declared. If there is a dissenting voice the chairperson shall call for a show of hands or cards, a count or a written ballot.

6.	Where a vote is taken by a count or a written ballot the counting of the votes shall be undertaken by scrutineers appointed for that purpose by the council, and the result shall be signed by the convenor of the scrutineering committee and handed to the chairperson in writing.

7.	The chairperson shall not exercise a deliberative vote, but when a vote is tied shall exercise a casting vote.

## 5.14	Points of order

A point of order may be taken by a member of the council at any time during the proceedings of the council. Any member wishing to interrupt a speaker shall stand and gain the attention of the chairperson with the words 'point of order!'.

On being recognised by the chairperson, the person raising a point of order shall simply state it and no other member shall speak at this stage. A point of order must refer strictly to the proceedings of the council.

The chairperson shall then either:

1.	rule on the point of order immediately; or

2.	ask certain members whom the chairperson selects to state their views on it and afterwards rule on the point; or

3.	refer the point of order to the council for decision by debate and vote.

When a ruling of the chairperson is challenged, the member who questions the ruling may be heard for no more than three minutes, the chairperson shall reply, and then a vote to sustain or disallow the ruling shall be taken without further discussion.

The following types of points of order may be raised:

### 5.14.1	Out of order
A member may draw attention to a breach of the *Guidelines for meeting procedures*, or may claim that the speaker is digressing from the matter being debated.

### 5.14.2	Private sitting
A member may interrupt a speaker in order to seek to move the procedural motion that the council sit in private.

### 5.14.3	Adjournment of the debate
A member may interrupt a speaker in order to seek to move the procedural motion that the debate be adjourned.

5.14.4 Personal explanation

Any member may claim the right to make a personal explanation if, in the course of the discussion, remarks made by that member are grossly misrepresented by a subsequent speaker.

5.14.5 Objection

Any member may raise objection if the remarks of a speaker are deemed objectionable or reflecting on character, or have a personal reference to any person in a manner that is offensive or derogatory.

5.14.6 Withdrawal of motion or amendment

If the council is using the procedures for *Making decisions by formal majority*, the mover of a motion or amendment may raise a point of order in order to seek to move the procedural motion that the motion or amendment be withdrawn.

5.15 Procedural motions

A procedural motion is one whereby the council determines in what manner or when the council deals with a particular item on its agenda. Unless otherwise specified, it may be moved without notice at any stage in a meeting, and requires a seconder. A member wishing to move a procedural motion may only do so after having received the call of the chairperson.

Without being limited thereto, procedural motions may include the following:

5.15.1 Use of procedures

This is a motion that an issue be considered using the procedures for *Making decisions by consensus*, or the procedures for *Making decisions by formal majority*. Leave of the council is required for the passing of this procedural motion. This motion is open to debate.

5.15.2 The order of the day

This is a motion that the council take up business which has been ordered by the council for that time. It may be combined with a motion for the adjournment of the current debate, and shall be put to the vote immediately without debate.

5.15.3 Adjournment of the debate

A motion for the adjournment of the debate, the session or the meeting shall be put to the vote immediately without debate. The defeat of such a motion shall not preclude it being moved again during the same debate.

A motion for the adjournment shall not be moved by a person who has already spoken in the debate.

If the motion for the adjournment carries, any person whose speech was interrupted shall have the right to speak first when the session is resumed, or if no person was interrupted then the person who moved for the adjournment shall have the first right of speech upon resumption of the debate.

5.15.4   Discussion in committee

This is a motion that the debate be continued as a discussion in committee. This motion is open to debate.

The council shall make its own rules for that discussion, but shall resume the use of the *Guidelines for meeting procedures* before the final decision is taken.

1.   All members of the council shall be members of the committee.

2.   The council may appoint a person to chair the committee.

3.   Separate minutes shall be kept of the proceedings.

4.   A motion need not be seconded.

5.   The committee may agree that a member may speak more than once on the same question.

6.   On the completion of the business referred to the committee, the council shall resume and a report of the committee shall be given.

5.15.5   Private sitting

A motion that the council should sit in private shall be put to the vote immediately without debate. The defeat of such a motion shall not preclude it being moved again during the same debate.

Following the passing of this motion, all persons who are not members of the council shall leave the meeting before discussion is resumed. Members shall treat the subsequent discussion in the strictest confidence, and shall not divulge its content to other persons.

The council shall continue to sit in private until the passing of a procedural motion that the council cease sitting in private. This motion shall be put to the vote immediately without debate.

5.15.6   Referral

This is a motion that the issue be referred to another council of the church, or to some other body, identified by the council in the procedural motion. This motion is open to debate.

5.15.7   Procedures during decisions by formal majority

The following procedural motions are described in the procedures for *Making decisions by formal majority,* and may be moved if those procedures are being used.

1.   A motion that the motion, amendment, or motion and amendment, be not put (also known as the previous question). See chapter 7 paragraph 7.5.

2.   A motion that the motion or amendments be withdrawn. See chapter 7 paragraph 7.4.5.

3.   A motion that the vote be now taken. See chapter 7 paragraph 7.7.1(b).

5.15.8   Determining the need for a decision now

When the council is following the procedures for *Making decisions by consensus* the chairperson may propose that the council proceed to determine the question. This motion is open to debate, and requires leave of the council to be carried. See chapter 6, paragraph 6.12.

5.16   Reconsideration of an issue

Any member who voted in favour of a resolution that has been accepted by the council, and who wishes the council to reconsider the issue within that meeting of the council, may propose its reconsideration. When the council is meeting in multiple sessions, the Business Committee shall, if possible, schedule the reconsideration at a session after that at which the notice is given.

The reconsideration shall be dealt with in the following manner:

1.   Leave of the council shall be sought for a proposal that the issue be re-opened. The member moving the motion may speak for no more than five minutes about the reason for wishing to have the issue re-opened. A seconder is required and the motion may be debated. The chairperson shall ensure that any debate is restricted to the reasons for the re-opening of the issue.

2.   If leave is granted, then it may be proposed either:

(a)   that the decision in question be rescinded; or

(b)   that the decision in question be rescinded and replaced by such words as may be specified.

The proposal is then considered and determined using procedures agreed by the council.

This process does not apply if a proposal to vary the terms of an earlier resolution of the council is brought to a subsequent meeting. Each meeting of a council is free to make its own decisions, and is not bound by previous decisions of the council.

5.17   Suspension of *Guidelines for meeting procedures*

The *Guidelines* may be suspended by leave of the council, provided that the motion for the suspension specifies what parts of the *Guidelines* are to be suspended and for what purpose.

Chapter 6
Making decisions by consensus

Rather than a strict list of procedures and restrictions, this chapter attempts to provide guidelines for the steps which may be used in making decisions by consensus. While it is probable that not every step is necessary or appropriate to every meeting or decision, those using this procedure will find it helpful to ensure that it is followed as closely as possible.

The step numbers provide a cross-reference to the diagram on **page 24**, which illustrates the procedure in a graphical manner.

6.1   Presenting an issue

Basic ideas are shared. Concerns are expressed. Background information that led to this issue being raised is shared. Any relevant information that will help people to understand the issue at hand is presented. A possible course of action may be presented.

6.2   Clarification of issues

All members of the council are free to seek clarification, to ask questions on the issue and to seek information from differing view points. This is the time to ensure that all relevant information is presented.

6.3   Open discussion

Discussion of the various viewpoints and opinions is encouraged. The use of voting cards (preferably orange for yes and blue for no) as indicators of response to speeches during the discussion is helpful, particularly in larger meetings. At the conclusion of a speech, those in general agreement with that speaker display their orange cards, and those in general disagreement display their blue cards. If the cards are not easily visible to the whole of the meeting the chairperson advises the meeting on the proportion of agreements and disagreements.

Another means of indicating support or disagreement with a speaker, if the council agrees, is to display the cards during the speech as well as at the conclusion. Other ways of indicating support or disagreement may be decided by the council.

As an indication of opinion that the council should move on to the next step in the business procedures, it may be agreed that members display their orange and blue cards together. This indication may be given both during and after speeches.

These indications of opinion help to avoid repetitious speeches and enable the chairperson and the whole meeting to see the strength of feeling for various ideas. Movement towards consensus is thus assisted.

6.4   Developing proposals

As open discussion proceeds, several specific proposals may be presented, or general agreement with the broad proposal initially put to the council may be expressed. This step is the opportunity for any useful ideas for resolving the issue to be presented.

6.5   Ideas are put together

If the issue is straightforward, and the number of ideas needed for its resolution is small, the chairperson or any other member of the council may present a firm proposal for discussion. However, it may be necessary to refer all the ideas to a steering or drafting group, or to the people who first presented the issue for discussion, to prepare a firm proposal for the council to consider.

6.6 Discussion of a specific proposal

The merits of the proposal are now shared by speakers. Members of the council are encouraged to indicate their agreement or disagreement, as outlined in paragraph 6.3.

6.7 Checking for consensus

When the chairperson believes that a consensus has been reached (to support or not to support) the council is asked to affirm that consensus has in fact been reached. This can be done by the chairperson affirming this belief, and asking if there are those who are not able to accept the consensus position.

In seeking to determine if this position has been reached, and in response to the number of members indicating support for the proposal, the chairperson may seek to identify the degree of consensus that has been reached. This may be done by asking for a response to a carefully stated question. For example, the chairperson may express an understanding of the position reached, and ask for an indication of agreement or disagreement. Typical questions could be:

- have we a consensus to support this proposal? or

- have we a consensus not to support this proposal?

If there is no strong support, discussion may be allowed to continue to enable doubts and questions to be asked and for further sharing of viewpoints.

If there is unanimity to support or not to support the proposal, then consensus has been reached and the council proceeds to Step 8.

However, there is a third possibility. There may be strong, but not unanimous, support for the proposal. In this case, and in order to understand the strength of opinion, the chairperson may ask questions such as:
- who supports the proposal?
- who does not support the proposal, but is prepared to accept it?
- who is not prepared to accept the proposal?

If there is no response to the last question, the chairperson may ask the council if they are prepared to declare the issue resolved by consensus, or if further discussion is needed. If the council agrees to the chairperson declaring that a consensus has been reached, the council moves to Step 8.

If there has been a response to the third question, then the chairperson invites these people to share their misgivings directly with the whole council, and discussion can continue. Where disagreement continues after a reasonable time, the council should move to Step 9.

6.8 Declaration of consensus

On the affirmation of consensus by whatever means is considered appropriate (voices, show of hands or cards), the chairperson declares the proposal approved or disapproved by consensus.

6.9   If objections are raised

The sharing of misgivings about the proposal may clarify the concerns of some individuals, or result in the changing of a word or two, which now brings either support for the proposal or acceptance of it. By returning to Step 7 the council may express its support or otherwise for any minor amendments, and the process proceeds.

Alternatively, the concerns shared may mean that further discussion is required. By returning to Step 6 the process may proceed.

It may be at this stage that major objections come to light through the sharing of disagreement. This disagreement may be such that it affects the wording of the proposal. If the disagreement can be resolved quickly, it may be possible for an amended proposal to be placed before the council (Step 5),or the steering or drafting group may need to rework the proposal before bringing it back to the council. In this case the process returns to Step 4.

Even at this comparatively late stage of the discussion, a major consideration may be shared which has escaped the council until now. Where the chairperson considers this to be the case, the process returns to Step 2, allowing the clarification of the new point and appropriate discussion of the attendant issues.

6.10   No unanimity

If, after all the questions have been asked under Step 7 above and there is still no way by which the council can proceed unanimously through Step 9, the council may agree to proceed to Step 11, where disagreement is registered.

6.11   Reaching consensus without unanimity (agreement)

If, after all attempts to reach a consensus, there are still people who are unable to support the consensus position, yet their number is small compared with the number indicating support for the consensus, the chairperson may ask:
· do those who are unable to support the proposal, and are not prepared to accept it, agree that your point of view has been listened to, even though you do not agree with the proposal and are not able to accept it?
· do those who support, or who are prepared to accept this proposal, agree that you have listened to, and have heard, what the others of our council are saying?

Given the assurance that the dissenting views have been both expressed and understood, the chairperson may ask the council if, given the degree of support, and the opportunity for dissenting views to have been expressed, it is now prepared to proceed to record an agreement to proceed with the proposal, or whether it is necessary to seek an alternative procedure.

In order to test the council's view on recording an agreement the chairperson may ask for indication of viewpoints on these two questions:

- "Do those unable to support the proposal and not prepared to accept it, believe your point of view has been listened to, even though you don't agree with the proposal and are not able to accept it?"
- "Do those who support or who are prepared to accept this proposal believe you have heard what the others of our council are saying?"

The council proceeds to discuss by consensus procedures the need for a decision at this meeting. If there is no consensus on this after a reasonable length of time, then the chairperson shall propose that the council now proceed to determine the question.

If there is a consensus that a decision is necessary, or if the motion that the council now proceed to determine the question is carried by leave of the council, the council moves immediately to discuss the question using the procedures for *Making decisions by formal majority*.

If the council does not agree that a decision is required at this meeting, there is an opportunity for further work, and the process may continue in accordance with the options in Step 14.

6.13   Decision by formal majority

When the council has resolved that a decision must be made at this meeting, or in the event that a procedural motion to determine the need for a decision now has been carried by leave of the council, the meeting shall decide the matter by using the procedures for *Making decisions by formal majority.*

6.14   Further possibilities

Where the council has not reached consensus, and believes that a final decision on the issue is not needed at this meeting, several options are available. The council may agree to initiate further work on the issue so that the discussion may proceed at the next meeting.

Some possibilities which may be considered include:
- referring the issue to another council or body, as outlined in chapter 4 *How we make decisions*;
- referring the issue back to the original party, or to a special group, for further consideration and eventual re-submission;
- deciding that the matter be no longer considered.

It can be seen from the above that the issue is at least dealt with in the mind of the council. It is -not left in the air, for even a decision to let the issue lapse may indicate the reason for that lapse, perhaps leaving the door open to further research and presentation, or closing the door firmly and stating the reasons for so doing.

At each step along the way the challenge to the council and the chairperson is to see that the council is able to make decisions by consensus.

Chapter 7
Making decisions by formal majority

7.1   Moving a motion

1.   A motion may be moved for the approval of any proposal before the council.

2.   Any motion not seconded shall lapse and shall not be recorded in the minutes of the meeting. The chairperson may if so desired call for an indication that some member is willing to second a motion before the mover of the motion is allowed to proceed to speak to the motion.

3.   The mover of the motion shall speak first to the motion, and may not reserve the right to speak to it subsequently.

4.   The seconder of the motion may speak second to the motion, but if the option is not exercised the seconder may reserve the right to speak to it subsequently.

7.2   Moving an amendment

1.   Any member who has not spoken to the main question may move an amendment to the motion.

2.   Any amendment not seconded shall lapse and shall not be recorded in the minutes of the meeting. The chairperson may call for an indication that some member is willing to second an amendment before the mover of the amendment is allowed to proceed to speak to the amendment.

3.   The mover of the amendment shall speak first to the amendment, and may not reserve the right to speak to it subsequently.

7.3   Amendments to the motion

1.   To be valid an amendment shall vary the subject matter of the motion currently being debated, either by varying the terms, or by omission or addition.

2.   An amendment shall not directly negate the intentions of the original motion.

3.   When an amendment is before the council, discussion shall be confined to the matter addressed by that amendment.

4.   A further amendment shall not be submitted until the current amendment is disposed of, but any speaker to an amendment may give notice of intention to propose another amendment. Any such further amendments shall be taken in the order in which notices thereof have been given.

5.   Any member giving notice of further amendment shall not then speak to the proposed amendment but shall be entitled to speak to the amendment when moving it.

7.4   Discussion of the motion

1.   Following speeches by the mover and seconder, the chairperson shall call for anyone wishing to speak to the motion.

2.   The chairperson may at any time call for speakers against or for the motion. If there is none, the chairperson shall put the motion to the vote immediately. If the debate continues, the chairperson may then call for speakers for or against the motion alternately.

3.   An amendment shall constitute a separate question from the original motion and from any other amendment.

4.   The mover and seconder of the motion may speak to an amendment to their motion, but must restrict their speech to the subject matter of the amendment. The mover's speech on the amendment does not constitute the mover's right of reply.

5.   The mover of a motion or amendment may move that by leave of the council the motion or amendment be withdrawn. This procedural motion requires a seconder and shall be put to the vote immediately without debate. The defeat of such a motion shall not preclude it from being moved again by the mover of the motion or amendment during the debate.

6.   No member may speak more than once to any question except in exercising the right of reply.

7.5   The previous question

This procedural motion is moved in the form that the motion, amendment, or motion and amendment, be not put. It requires a seconder and is open to debate.

The vote on this procedural motion may be taken at any time during the debate, but must precede the vote on the motion or amendment before the council.

If the procedural motion is passed in the form 'that the motion, or motion and amendment, be not put' the council moves immediately to the next item of business. If the procedural motion is passed in the form 'that the amendment be not put' the council moves immediately to consider any further amendment or the motion. The minutes of the meeting shall carry no record of the business against which this procedural motion has been carried, nor of the procedural motion itself.

If the procedural motion is lost, the debate continues. Rejection of the procedural motion shall not preclude it being moved again during the same debate.

7.6   Right of reply

The mover of the motion shall have the right of reply immediately prior to the vote on the motion (or the motion as amended) being taken. The reply shall be limited to the answering of matters raised in opposition to the motion and shall not introduce any new arguments.

7.7   Closure of the debate

1.   The debate shall be closed:

    (a)   when there are no further speakers for or against the motion, or motion and amendment; or

    (b)   when a motion 'that the vote be now taken' is carried by leave of the council. Such a motion may be submitted by any member who has not taken part in the debate, after having received the call of the chairperson. A seconder is required for this motion. If in the opinion of the chairperson the debate has apparently covered all the ground and is becoming unduly extended or repetitious, the motion may also be submitted by the chairperson. This motion shall be put to the vote immediately without debate; or

    (c)   as a result of a procedural motion.

2.   If a motion and amendment are before the council, the chairperson shall put the amendment.

3.   Following the vote, debate is resumed on the motion or the amended motion, as appropriate, and thereupon a further amendment may be proposed.

4.   If, in addition to the motion and amendment being debated, notice of further amendment has been given, the chairperson shall put the amendment. Thereafter the person who has given notice of the amendment next in order may move and speak to such amendment, either as an amendment on the original motion, or on the original motion as amended, provided that it is a proper amendment thereon. The debate may then proceed.

5.   If no further amendment is before the council, and there is no further debate, the chairperson shall call on the mover of the motion who may exercise the right of reply, and once this has been done no further questions or debate shall be permitted. Immediately after such reply the chairperson shall put the motion.

APPENDIX 1

FORMAL MAJORITY PROCEDURES

| INFORMATION SESSION | DELIBERATIVE SESSION | DECISION SESSION | *Procedural proposals may be moved at any stage after receiving Chair's call (see 5.16) |

Motion proposed

Chair asks for seconder → Yes / No

No → Motion lapses – not recorded in minutes

Yes → Mover speaks to motion – 5 mins or less

Seconder invited to speak
- Yes – may speak for 3 mins or less
- No – may resserve speech till later

Seconder may seek Chair's call for reserved speech

Any other speakers?
- No
- Yes

Chair calls speakers – 3 mins or less each

Amendments?
- No
- Yes → Member who has not spoken may move amendment when called

Chair seeks seconder to amendment → No → Amendment lapses – not recorded in minutes

Yes → Mover of amendment speaks – 3 mins or less

No further speakers or other interventions? *

Chair calls mover of original motion for right of reply

Chair states (amended) motion clearly, puts to vote

Chair has casting vote in tied decision

Provisional declaration of result

Dissenting voice to result?
- No
- Yes

Count of hands or card or written ballot

Chair calls speakers including amendment seconder (3 mins), amendment issues only

* No further speaker or other intervention?

Chair states amendment clearly, puts to vote
- No – amendment lapses
- Yes – amendment approved

* Further debate on original motion

Further amendment?
- No → * Further debate on original motion
- Yes

Result declared

This Flow Chart from the *Manual for Meetings* is a fixture in the latest edition of the *Manual* since 2004

One method of subgroup participation in decision-making

Paragraph 3.4 of the *Manual* refers to the use of subgroup activities. The method of small group participation in this Appendix can appropriately be used where a council is considering items of major significance and where sufficient time is available (e.g. where the council meets over several days or where the different steps can be spread over two or more meetings).

This appendix details how working groups at the Uniting Church's 1994 National Assembly proved to be very helpful in the decision-making process, especially in the seeking of consensus. Assembly members felt they had opportunity to contribute to the decision, that all opinions were heard and taken seriously, and that proposals were refined and precisely worded.

Each working group consisted of 8–10 Assembly members, one of whom had previously been designated as leader. Members were allocated to their groups by random selection, ensuring a cross-section of Assembly members in each, except that representatives of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress gathered in one group. Leaders attended a 60 minute briefing session on the first day of the Assembly.

The Business Committee, following consultation with proposers of Assembly business, selected several agenda items to be considered by each of the working groups. These items were considered to be among the most important and controversial facing the Assembly.

The aims of the working groups were:
- to facilitate discussion on key proposals brought to the Assembly; the working groups were involved in the process of decision-making which helped formulate Assembly resolutions;
- to enable the opinions of individual members of the Assembly to be expressed and heard;
- to help build a sense of community within the Assembly;
- to ensure communication between Assembly members, the Business Committee, and the agencies and commissions of the Assembly.

Steps in the group process:

1. The agenda item was introduced to the Assembly by the proposers in an information and deliberative plenary session. Proposers had between 5 and 20 minutes to present their case (as determined by the Business Committee depending on the size and complexity of the business). Then a period of up to 30 minutes was allowed for comment and question, with the main purpose being clarification of the issues rather than argument. However, where the Business Committee was aware of opposition to the proposals, care was taken to ensure that the opponents stated their case during the time of deliberation.

2. Shortly after (mostly later that same day) the working groups met to discuss the item. As resource papers each group had the Assembly working papers, the proposed motions, a key phrases summary sheet prepared by the proposers which was placed in view on the floor between group members, and a response form prepared by the Business Committee. The proposers were available on request to provide clarification and comment to any group.

3.   After about 30 minutes of discussion the group completed its response form. The forms sought indications of group consensus, agreement or opposition on the proposals; allowed for suggestions of amendments or new proposals; asked if there was group comment to be made to the Assembly and/or the proposers of the business; and gave opportunity for any individual or minority comment to the Assembly or the proposers which the group felt needed to be communicated. A sample form is attached.

4.   After consulting with the Business Committee to determine the most appropriate plenary process, the Facilitation Group then reported to a 'decision' plenary session of the Assembly on the outcome of the working groups process. Individual and minority voices were heard by the Assembly. The revised resolutions were presented and discussed, and any amendments or new proposals were considered. The Assembly made its decisions, usually by consensus.

WORKING GROUPS RESPONSE FORM

Group leader: _____ Group number: _____

BLANK FORM

1.   Has the group reached a consensus in support of the motion? (Step 7)   YES/NO

2.   If no to question 1, has the group reached agreement (Step 10) in support of the motion?
                                                                        YES/NO

3.   Does the group suggest:

     any minor change of words? (Step 7)

     any amended proposal? (Step 4)

     any new proposal? (Step 2)

     or does the group simply oppose the proposal?

     If so, write in here (or on separate sheet):

4.   Does the group have any comments (e.g. suggestions, explanations, statements, critique, insights) it wishes to make to:

     –   the Assembly in plenary session?

     –   the movers of the motion or any Assembly agency?

5.   Is there any individual or minority comment which the group feels should be communicated to:

     –   the Assembly in plenary session?

     –   the movers of the motion or any Assembly agency?

8. Index

The latest version of the *Manual for Meetings in the Uniting Church* can be found at:
http://wr.victas.uca.org.au/assets/637/Manual_for_Meetings.pdf

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