

Methods for Decision Making in the Parish Community

From *In Your Holy Spirit: Shaping the Parish Through Spiritual Practice*, Robert A. Gallagher, OA

Discernment

Discernment has become a frequently misused concept in the church. Some clergy and parishes get carried away thinking that all decision-making is discernment. One parish was going to discern what kind of copier to purchase, as though God had a particular brand and model in mind.

One way of thinking about discernment processes in the community is that they have to do with decisions requiring us to see what's not obvious[maybe to be able to see "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, and whatever is commendable." (Philippians 4:8). Discernment suggests the desire and ability to look beyond what is apparent, to use our capacity for reflection, empathy and practical judgment so we might see clearly.

Discernment and decision-making are interrelated processes. The parish needs valid and useful information, clarity about its choices, freedom from coercion and destructive repetitive patterns, and emotional maturity in its leadership. We also need an understanding of the spiritual life, ways of being reflective, and a functional spiritual discipline.

It is a destructive and mistaken assumption to think that God has one right answer or path for us and we are to "discern" it. It's a misguided view to think of discernment as "uncovering" what God wills for us. Real discernment is an engagement with God, at times a wrestling with God, leading us to holiness as a community and as individuals.

Discernment is collaboration with God in shaping our common life. Thomas Merton expressed it this way, "Our vocation is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny—to work out our own identity in God, which the Bible calls 'working out salvation,' is a labor which requires sacrifice and anguish, risk and many tears."

Communal discernment is the process by which a community of faith seeks to see God's movement in the world and in that community's life. It is our attempt to see "rightly[]" to see our experience and our goals through the eyes of Christ. It is our striving to listen deeply and grow in our conformity with God's love for us.

There may be many faithful pathways for a parish or an individual. Discernment isn't about finding the one right way. It is about grounding our life in prayer, reflectiveness, and community. It is also about testing the spirit of our decisions: can we see the Spirit's movement, the influence of the church and a consistency with history and gifts?

Communal discernment is already happening in all Christian communities. It may be more or less skilled, grounded or intentional in various communities. To the extent a community is grounded in Eucharist and the daily prayers, and has ways of being reflective, that will show itself in the decisions made and the life lived.

In any case, our discernment is only confirmed over time. It is confirmed by the experience and acceptance of the community.

The measure is whether the decision brought us to holiness rather than whether the decision was “correct.”

Regular community meetings

The parish community needs regular meetings over the course of the year. At times the whole parish, at other times a congregation within the parish. That will depend on the issues to be engaged. These meetings need to make use of the methods known to facilitate dialogue and listening. Having three or four such meetings each year provides the opportunity to engage more people in the significant questions of the community’s life.

It is important that these not turn into “town meetings” with their image of a contentious and argumentative spirit. It’s also important that they not undercut the responsibility of the rector and vestry for decisions they have to make. They are a chance for leaders to test things with the community and for the community to hear its own voice. The effect of such regular gatherings is usually increased trust and commitment.

Wait for all to arrive

You may recall the 2010 experience of the 33 miners in Chile. There had been a cave-in on August 5. For 17 days no one above ground knew if the miners were alive. Engineers drilling in search finally found them. They were underground for 69 days and they all survived.

In their time in the mine they developed a working community that included smaller groupings of eleven, and involved prayer and an interesting norm around meals. As of early September the hole through which all materials, food and messages had to pass was just 4 inches across. Luis Urzua, the shift leader, insisted that all the miners wait until everyone got food through the borehole before anyone began to eat.⁵²

This is an act of community that we see in First Corinthians, 11:33 (“when you come together to eat, wait for one another”) and Benedict’s Rule. Benedict wanted all to gather for the meal so they could all “pray together and sit down to table at the same time.”

In the same chapter of the Rule a similar expectation is applied to the Office. Along with that expectation comes one about personal responsibility.

As soon as the signal for the time of the divine office is heard, let everyone, leaving whatever he hath in his hands, hasten with all speed, yet with gravity, that there may be no cause for levity. Therefore, let nothing be preferred to the Work of God.

Rule of St. Benedict

A parish can engage several related spiritual practices that can build up the community.

- Arrange meals in a way that easily allows all to begin eating at the same time.
- Wait for all to arrive before beginning a meeting. When a person needs to leave the room, suspend the discussion until all are together again.
- Don't have any other activities taking place at the times of Eucharist and Office. The parish business office can take a break and meetings can begin after the times of worship.

Around the circle

This is a useful method of allowing everyone to be heard, and is something I've used with up to 45 people. Participants speak in turn around the circle. The comment is to be brief and on one point. The method helps equalize the voices in the room so the more hesitant are heard along with the more assertive. It can be especially useful when dealing with controversial issues.

Variations include the fishbowl and the Samoan circle. The methods are defined in different ways by various facilitators. In both cases there is a group that sits within the larger circle of participants and engages in a conversation. The inner group is to consist of the various positions on an issue, or might be an "expert panel."

Depending on your objectives and issues, such as the time available, the outer group might remain silent, or there might be an opportunity for comment or questions from the outer circle, or there might be a way for someone from the outer circle to join the inner circle.

Testing

In a testing process an issue is identified and a spectrum, scale, is created to reflect the views present in the community. For example:

The "testing process" can be done for a few minutes at coffee hour, at vestry meetings, in working teams and at parish community meetings. It will usually be most effective if done when the group is gathered and can respond and discuss the result, formally or informally.

Face-to-face processes are usually more effective in promoting careful listening and effective response. A rule of thumb might be to use a "testing process" about four times per year with the whole community and possibly ten times with the vestry.

We need to do less of this	We need to stay with the current amount	We need to do more of this
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The testing process is a way to find out where the larger

community stands on certain questions or issues. It helps both the community and the leadership get a sense of where the group is collectively. It's important for parish leaders and the congregation to understand that the testing process is *not* a way to shift decision-making authority to a vote of the congregation. The results do not mean that any particular change will take place.

Examples of useful areas to test: satisfaction with the amount of silence in liturgy, sense of understanding and competence with using the Daily Office, satisfaction with existing methods of Reflection, overall satisfaction with parish life.

Examples of ways of framing questions or the discussion that are *not* useful include setting up binary responses, such as, "I would prefer piano music to the organ at 10:30." Similarly, you don't want to test in areas where the group is not competent to respond.

Context matters. It might, for instance, be very useful for the rector to gather specific feedback about liturgical issues or her sermons from a small, trusted group of parishioners who know something about liturgy and about homiletics. This would not, however, be a useful exercise if expanded to the parish as a whole.

Arrangement of space

Peter Block maintains that in arranging meeting space we are trying "to build relatedness, accountability, and commitment." "Physical space is more decisive in creating community than we realize. Most meeting spaces are designed for control, negotiation, and persuasion...Community is built when we sit in circles, when there are windows and the walls have signs of life, when every voice can be equally heard." Block prefers that there be no tables.

Circles provide a sense of closeness, allow people to better notice body language, and invite people to lean in toward one another. When the work involves processes such as brainstorming, group problem solving or strategizing, or the use of a method such as force field analysis or SWOT, the circle can be opened at an end to allow the use of newsprint pads for recording the work. In those cases the objective is to maximize the ability of people to see one another and the workspace with the newsprint pads.

Use of newsprint (flip chart pads)

Using newsprint pads to record the group's thinking can improve participation, reduce repetition, and help people feel heard.

The best arrangement is to have pegs in a wall allowing several pads to be hung. It's better use of space, reduces the number of flip chart easels a parish needs, and eliminates the temptation to "flip" the page over and thus hide the work just completed.