



Fostering Postures for Spiritual Discernment In our Congregations

By Joy Fisher

In my third year of serving the Midway Church, we came to a crossroads. Estimates for the needed repairs to the building started at \$75,000. The church had enough money in reserves but the leaders shook their heads in solemn agreement when I stated, “Spending that kind of money on the building is not good stewardship if we’re just going to keep doing what we’ve been doing. If it’s part of an effort to change everything and begin our ministry anew in some way, it may be a good investment. But I cannot in good conscience allow us to spend that kind of money just to allow us to keep going as we have.” We were down to 30 people in Sunday worship. The average age of the members was 78. The people inside the church did not reflect the demographic changes to the community of the last 20 years. The building crisis forced the question that had been just under the surface for over a decade: what is God calling us to? Are we called to stay in some new way? Or is it time to celebrate 125 years of ministry and close in order to enable some new ministry?

We decided to enter into a season of “discernment.” The elders invited the members to commit to 30 days of prayer and fasting, committing to pray at least 20 minutes a day about the future of the congregation. I provided a list of scriptures for daily reflection and suggestions for spiritual practices. As I introduced this “season of discernment” something nagged inside of me. It’s not enough. 30 days of “suddenly” asking for God’s guidance feels like too little, too late. And why do I need to teach this group of seasoned disciples how to pray intentionally? Our season of discernment felt like a meager attempt at listening for the Spirit’s leading.

I do believe God spoke to the leaders through their prayers and their openness in that month. But I've never looked back with pride at the process I led. It felt a little like stopping and asking for directions once we are hopelessly lost, rather than listening to the promptings of a GPS or someone in the passenger seat who knows the way.

Growing up I do not remember hearing the word discernment other than in Paul's list of spiritual gifts in I Corinthians 12. "Discerning the spirits," which I understood as distinguishing between evil spirits and God's Spirit, sounded like a gift a few people might receive, not a gift for all of God's people. As I read Paul's list of gifts I believed I had not received the gift of tongues, healing, or discerning the spirits; I assumed someone else had.

In recent years, "discernment" has become a much more common word in church language. Sometimes as I hear it used it sounds like simply a "churchy" way to say, "decide." "We'll need to *discern* the best day for the church picnic." Discernment becomes a process of listing pros and cons, or consulting last year's minutes to see how we did it before -- deciding, rather than listening for the Spirit to see if we should make a change in how we do things (or whether we should be doing it at all.)

Even when the matter to be discerned is of great consequence -- for example, nominating the next class of elders -- the process is often more like deciding than discerning. This should be a time of listening for who in the congregation has the spiritual maturity and gifts for leadership. Often it involves simply naming people who have the time, will actually say yes, did it before, are part of a family or group that runs the church anyway, or would pitch a fit if they were not asked. There is a prayer at the beginning and ending of the meeting, but who has not been in a meeting where the prayer was essentially, "Dear God, please bless what we come up with?"

There is a story in Acts that stirs my spirit and sparks my ministry. In Acts 16, Paul and his companions were traveling and preaching in Phrygia and Galatia, "having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia." From there, it says they tried to go to Bithynia, but, "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them." They were starting churches! They were doing good work, spreading the gospel! All of these places presumably needed to hear the good news of God's love. Why shouldn't they go anywhere their feet could carry them to evangelize?

And exactly how did the Spirit "forbid" them? Did they start down the road and discover it was blocked? Did circumstances prevent them, which they took to be God's way of letting them know it was forbidden? Did they go to Bithynia and get run out of town? Did a giant vision of Christ himself stand in the road with his arms folded, saying, "No!?"

Luke describes in Acts a church that is so in tune with the Spirit that when the Spirit says go, they go. When the Spirit says stop, they stop. And if the Spirit doesn't speak... they wait. Finally, the Spirit came to Paul in a dream in the words of an unidentified man in Macedonia inviting Paul, "Come over here and help us." (Acts 16:9) Consequently, they followed the Spirit's leading to Macedonia, where they met, not the man from the dream, but eventually Lydia, whose hospitality to them was the beginning of the church in Europe.

This story fascinates me and sparks in me a yearning for that kind of attunement to the Spirit. I pray for the kind of openness, that -- whether God speaks in dreams, or circumstances, or committee deliberations, or gentle nudges from within -- that we be the kinds of disciples, that we be the kind of church, that is open and listening and ready to follow the Spirit's leading.

What is Discernment?

The Greek word in the New Testament for Discernment is *diakrinos*, which means to distinguish, to judge, to sort. Paul was writing to the Corinthians about the spiritual gift that allows us to sort out what is of God and what is something else, something less. Elizabeth Liebert in her book, *The Soul of Discernment*, defines discernment as distinguishing between God's work and a penultimate good.¹ For Paul and friends, starting churches in Asia seemed like a "good idea," but it was not God's calling in the moment. Discernment allowed them to hold their "good ideas" loosely and let them go when the Spirit said, "no." Their attunement, their posture, allowed them to wait and listen for further instructions.

Often in our churches today we treat discernment as a tool for decision-making, as we did at Midway in a time of crisis. Our attempts at discernment are episodic, stopping and asking for directions, rather than the kind of attunement of the apostles in Acts, listening for the voice of the One in the passenger's seat who can reveal the next step.

Henri Nouwen, in his book *Discernment*, describes spiritual discernment as a way of life, rather than as a tool to be used to make a decision.² Discernment is a relationship. It is a posture of waiting and listening and watching for God's leading. Expectantly, we look for "signs" -- in Scripture, in conversations, in community, in nature, in circumstances. We reflect together and wonder together, asking, "Where is God at work in our midst?" The Church of my experience values strategic 5-year plans with measurable goals and steps to accomplish those goals. As a leader in the church I have been trained to facilitate a Strategic Planning process that takes place over a couple of weekends, during which leaders ask together, "Where do we want to be 5 years from now?" There is an opening devotion. There is a block of 20 minutes set aside for silent reflection to invite God to speak to their imaginations. At the end there is expected to be a clear picture of where they will be in 5

years along with a timeline of steps to achieve their goals. Is this discernment? Or is this, “Dear God, please bless what we come up with?” Are we truly committed to listening for God’s next step, or are we willing to settle for what seems to be a good enough idea?

I’ve stopped leading the Strategic Planning process that I learned. But how do we help our churches to grow in spiritual discernment? How do we foster the kind of attunement to the Spirit that Acts describes as central to our life as church? What are the postures needed for discerning how God is at work in our world and how God is inviting us to be part of that work?

Postures for Discernment

When we speak of postures, we may think of physical postures. What posture would you take if I were throwing you a ball? You would stand up, lean forward, watch closely, ready your hands. Postures are anticipatory. If you believe the world is a terrible place, you live in a posture of fear and judgment. If you believe the world is the place where God is at work, you live in a posture of hope and expectation.

Today I am writing to leaders in the church, asking, “How do we foster postures of discernment in our congregations?” First, we must ask what are the postures that anticipate the leading of the Holy Spirit? I am suggesting three postures that I believe are especially needed in our faith communities as we listen for what God is doing and what God is inviting us to: a Posture of Spiritual Freedom, a Posture of Listening, and a Posture of Curiosity. These may overlap, and there are certainly others to explore, but let’s start here.

Spiritual Freedom

If discernment is seeking God’s will more deeply than any penultimate good, we must be willing to let go of our attachments to our own ideas, preferences, traditions, even beliefs. The ancient spiritual fathers and mothers exhort us to the virtue of “Indifference.” Indifference is not to be understood as apathy, but the ability to hold things lightly. We come to God with open hands, inviting God to take from us what is not needed and place in us what is better. If I begin a church meeting praying, “Lord we are open to your leading,” but I continue to push for what I believe is best, I am spiritually bound, or un-free. We may think of Jesus’ parable of the pearl of great price. When the merchant discovers the one great pearl, he becomes indifferent to everything else. Spiritual freedom asks, “Can we long for God’s way so deeply that we’re able to let go of our own ways?”

We are in a time where everything about the church as we have known it is being questioned. Many of us grew up in a time when the church was highly regarded in society and the institution of church was stable. As a result, churches planned by looking backwards, pulling out last year's calendar and minutes to see how we've always done it. There were strongly established patterns of who made decisions and a small range of decisions to be made within the image of church as we knew it. It is past time for our churches to let go of deciding based on "what we've always done," (which may have been God's good leading 40 years ago) and tune our hearts to what new thing God is inviting us to. Heifetz and Linsky, in *Leadership on the Line*, remind us that all change involves loss. Our habits, values, and attitudes are part of our very identity. There will be grief involved in letting go of the parts of church that mean so much to us.³ Yet holding on to the past is idolatry, settling for our own "good enough" ideas instead of God's new thing. Spiritual freedom is having faith to die to our own comfort zone and risk joining in God's mission in new, not-yet-comfortable ways.

Questions for Reflection: What are the areas of spiritual un-freedom in yourself and in your faith community that keep you from praying with open hearts and open hands? How can we create a culture of accountability to name spiritual un-freedom when it impedes spiritual discernment?

Listening

If a posture is anticipatory, the posture of listening anticipates that God will speak to us. Listening is first about waiting. Listening involves first making space, keeping silence. Listening flows from Spiritual Freedom, as I set aside my own thoughts, and we set aside our previous imaginations, in hope that God is showing us something new. Prayer is not transactional – "if I say a prayer before we vote, then God will guide our vote, and then the outcome must be God's will." Prayer is relational. We aren't praying for an answer as much as basking in, and reflecting, God's love. Discernment is a way of life, a life of prayer, a posture of listening attentively – to our day-to-day experiences and life in community – asking, "What is God up to here?"

Central to our Reformed Theology is the belief in the "Priesthood of All Believers." At Pentecost we believe Joel's prophecy was fulfilled, that God would, "pour out my Spirit upon *all* flesh." (Joel 2:29) As leaders we may enjoy being seen as the "expert," the one people look to to receive God's vision for the church. Part of the posture of listening is listening for God in unexpected places and new voices. Each of us has had experiences of hearing God's voice come through a friend, a family member, or a child, and yet our decision-making process is often structured around listening to the ordained, trained, experts. What if we developed practices of listening in our congregations, inviting all voices to be part of reflecting together on what God might be doing in our midst? Are there ways

we can encourage members, especially those who may be on the margins, to share their stories, listening for signs of what God might be up to?

Part of listening with open hearts is a willingness to engage in conflict as part of discernment. If we listen to the same old voices, we will often hear one homogenous message. If we open the floor to diverse persons from diverse perspectives we will need to let go of the illusion of “perfect harmony.” Many Christians hold to the myth that if we are all filled with the Holy Spirit we will all naturally agree, along with the myth that conflict is failure. Paul’s epistles and the stories of Acts make clear that conflict is part of how God leads us, as we listen to all sides and hash things out together!

We should also assume that God is speaking in and through our neighbors *outside* the walls of the church. Repeatedly in the gospels and Acts we see God at work outside our “acceptable” boundaries. The Magi, the Syro-Phoenician woman, the good Samaritan, the Ethiopian Eunuch, Cornelius, and on and on. We should expect that God is already at work in the lives of our “spiritual, but not religious” neighbors. If we want to know what God is doing in our communities and how we can be part of God’s work, we need to be listening deeply to the stories, needs, hopes and struggles of the people in our communities.

Discernment is not just for “us,” to impart God’s special knowledge for us to possess; discernment is listening for God’s invitation into God’s mission.

Questions for Reflection: How do you make space for waiting and listening for the Spirit? What voices need to be heard in your community?

Curiosity

Fostering a posture of curiosity, innovation and risk-taking is essential for churches as we seek to discern where God is leading us next. If our churches have been structured around achievement, success, mastery, and control they have been built on the “sand” of our own wisdom. The business world is beginning to embrace the importance of failure as part of learning and growing. Churches need to embrace a new spirit of experimentation, trying and failing, playfulness and dancing. In his book *The Agile Church*, Dwight Zscheile encourages churches to be less like a classical musician – playing from a pre-determined script with expected outcomes -- and more like jazz musician – learning while doing, embracing imperfection, pushing boundaries, free and creative.⁴ Mark Love in *It Seemed Good to the Holy Spirit and Us*, writes that a sure sign of the Holy Spirit is surprise. Rather than judging our efforts in the church as successes or failures, Love invites us to ask, “What surprised us?”⁵ A church I know answers every new idea with the question, “Will it bring in more people?” Their addiction to success keeps them from hearing what new thing God might be doing. What if the new thing doesn’t bring new people in the doors? What if no new people ever come in our doors? What if the 45 people in this church are all there is

ever going to be? And what if that new thing is still what God is inviting us to try? This requires spiritual freedom of choosing God's leading over our own ideas of success. It requires loving God's people more than we love our own name, tradition, or identity. *Questions for Reflection: What are ways your church plays and experiments? How do they name and celebrate the surprises that come from discerning and following the Spirit?*

Creating a "Spirit Tank"

I'm curious as to how church leaders are cultivating a culture of spiritual discernment in their congregations, beyond engaging in episodic seasons of discernment to address particular questions or crises. How are leaders fostering the postures of spiritual freedom, deep listening, and playful curiosity? I'm imagining the congregation as something like a "Spirit Tank." A think tank is a group that values new thoughts and encourages new insights. It is made up of diverse experts in pursuit of greater knowledge which comes through challenging each other and exploring together. A Spirit Tank might be a group of people who come together to share stories and experiences, reflecting together on where they have seen God at work in their lives and communities. I imagine them praying together about one another's challenges and those of their neighbors. They would listen deeply and play together joyously, waiting for the Spirit to surprise, expecting the Spirit to lead in new ways.

Mark Love describes a process in his church where, rather than having occasional congregational meetings to decide things, they have monthly congregational conversations. Once a month they gather in groups of 6-8 around round tables to consider an issue facing their church or their community. One month they heard from some parents of children with special needs. Together around the tables, members talked about what they'd heard, questions they had, ideas it sparked, new ways of responding. Over time these concerns helped to shape a new ministry that brought greater love and support and learning among the members of the congregation.⁶ Mark is describing the kind of Spirit tank where people of faith can observe the challenges present in their context and ask -- without already knowing the answers -- what is God telling us? How is God at work? What might we need to let go of in order to join in God's work?

Question for Reflection: Is your church a Spirit tank? How can you imagine fostering a culture of curiosity and reflection among the people around you? What other postures might we need to foster in order to create a culture of attunement to the Spirit in our churches?

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Notes

¹ Elizabeth Liebert, *The Soul of Discernment: A Spiritual Practice for Communities and Institutions* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2015) p. 20.

² Henri Nouwen, *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2013) p. ix.

³ Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2017) p. 27.

⁴ Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2014) p. 107.

⁵ Mark Love, *It Seemed Good to the Spirit and to Us* (Unpublished manuscript, expected to be published 2020) p. 68.

⁶ Love, p. 238.