

Are you using your unique gifts in an appropriate ministry?

According to one study, the most important quality that healthy, growing Christian churches need and have in common is gift-oriented ministry. "When Christians serve in their area of giftedness, they generally function less in their own strength and more in the power of the Holy Spirit . . . No factor influences the contentedness of Christians more than whether they are using their gifts or not."¹

Sadly, most Christians either are not involved in a ministry or participate in a ministry that does not match their gifts. This happens especially when congregations operate in an organizational model of volunteerism, asking people to volunteer for various activities without first identifying their gifts or desires for those particular ministries. Many churches have an effective process for discerning gifts for ordained ministry, and need to further develop the discernment process in contemplation of sending lay people into the world to do ministry.

For the church to become more of the body of Christ, each person needs to bring and use their special gifts in the community of faith. Healthy churches adopt systems to meet people and help them identify their gifts and passions, and then provide affirmation, training, coaching and resources for people to live into their ministries.

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13). We often wonder what we are to do to have a closer relationship with God. But there are also times when we feel a sense of purpose, a sense of direction to a new activity or destination. That sense tends to be unique and individual and we tend to recognize it as our deepest personal nature. This sense of purpose is *vocation*. As we discover a vocation, or calling, we recognize God's call to use unique gifts God has given us for God's purposes.

There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:4-7). Each act of spiritual discovery is as unique and individual as our personal gifts. This is challenging because we cannot look to some objective standard to discover the direction of our personal spiritual journey. Each of us is responsible for discovering the uniqueness of God's love for us: the special gifts God gives me and the individual purpose to which God calls me. The activity of discernment is challenging because it requires us to distinguish between God's call for us and other distracting calls as from our egos, our careers, our culture and so on.

"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened" (Luke 11:9-10). Discernment needs to be intentional, deliberate and spiritual. Discernment is truly a wonderful "process" during which we can take time to listen

¹ Christian A. Schwarz, Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996) at 24.

to our deepest natures; it is much more than just a one-time personality or career test and more than a regular procedure that reaches a specific result.² I found Julia Cameron's The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity,³ a helpful tool for beginning discernment of personal gifts. In a group study, each of us found significant new insights into our personal gifts and vocations. We also each found that we needed to go further than this particular tool by focusing on our religious lives – because discernment occurs not just through individual creativity but through a deeper relationship with God.

"Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:19-20). Discernment for ministry often occurs best in community. We need to receive insights from others critically, recognizing the possibilities for error even in Christian community. But our own perspectives are limited and we learn better as we lovingly and respectfully share our thoughts and gain insights from others. And, beyond the learning process, others will support us and enable us in our ministries. Our ministries are not just our own; they are from and for the community as well.

I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding (Jeremiah 3:15). So how do we begin to discern in community? One beginning is with confirmation and baptismal preparation programs. Another good possibility is gifts discernment courses.⁴

If we neglect discernment, we neglect the discovery of our true identity – of who God calls us to be. A Christian who functions in a close relationship with God in a ministry that matches his or her giftedness can begin to say with Saint Paul, "It is no longer I who live, it is Christ who lives in me." Ultimately, church development is helping Christians find the place in church where God calls them to serve.

² Good books about discernment include: Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean and Susan M. Ward, Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1991); John Ackerman, Listening to God: Spiritual Formation in the Congregation (The Alban Institute, 2001).

³ (New York) G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1992).