

Listening to God in Community

A church striving to be the body of Christ needs to become Christ-centered and, like Jesus, continually strive to discern God's will for the community. Discernment is listening to and distinguishing God's voice and action from other voices and activities in the world. An effective congregational development process helps us to recognize the presence of God and respond accordingly: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2).

God has created us and prepared us for the purposes to which God calls us. The call of our creator, our vocation, is our true identity and purpose. A church community needs to be able to answer: Who is God calling this congregation to be? And how is this congregation responding to that call? Answering these questions brings us together and shows us the common paths we are called to take on our spiritual journey.

Discerning our vocation in community is challenging. Each church has a unique mission to respond to God's calling in the world. A church cannot simply measure itself against some third party objective standard of what a church should be. Rather than thinking that there is a single Way for a church to serve God, each community needs to be aware of its unique context and personality and hear God's particular call for that church. God's call always leaves open the freedom of choosing among unique opportunities that God has placed before the community.

Knowing ourselves in humility and truth often helps point to where God is calling us. John Calvin says in the first line of his *Institutes of Christian Religion* that wisdom is found in the knowledge of God and the knowledge of our selves. To begin to develop a good understanding of ourselves, we need to recognize:

- The gifts and abilities that God has given us (our talents, competencies, capacities);
- Our unique situation and the opportunities that presents (including the populations, communities or areas the congregation is called to serve);
- Where our organization measures developmentally (in terms of involvement, structures and communication);
- What our shared beliefs and norms are; and
- Most importantly, what brings us joy (what activities animate and energize us).

As we take time to evaluate our community, we especially benefit by listening to one another and building relationships. Although one church spent over a year creating seventy-two shared core values statements, I expect their real commonality and sense of purpose came from the process of sharing, and coming to a consensus about, their beliefs. Another benefit of careful evaluation is the opportunity to recognize and celebrate God's blessings and presence in our community. We tend to focus too much

on problems and not enough on appreciation. Intentional evaluation also helps us to be direct and realistic about the challenges facing the congregation in its particular context and development stage.

A number of tools are available to help in assessments of a congregation's current reality – who and where we are – including surveys, gifts inventories and demographic studies. However, discernment cannot be a mechanical process; it must involve listening, study, prayer, imagination, and reflection on God's word. Discernment in church communities is far different from secular strategic planning – emphasizing listening to God and one another more than assessing the situation and making choices. This listening is a dialogue between who we are and whom God is calling us to be. Better discernment comes from developing an ever closer relationship with God.

In the process of discernment, we must avoid the temptation to jump directly to conclusions about strategy. Discernment is a process of identification, not an immediate means of solving problems or creating new programs. If we talk too early about strategy, we may rule out other possibilities for ourselves. A tangible result of a community discernment process should be the development of an honest statement about who this congregation is, who this congregation is becoming, and who might find a wonderful church home in this congregation.

"I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you." (Ephesians 1:17).