

## **Session A: Discerning Christian Identity in Community**

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, please *guide us*. Draw our hearts to you, guide our minds to perceive what is right, fill our imaginations and control our wills. Let us recognize our dependence on you, and help us hear and understand who you are calling each of us, and our community, to be. Shepherd us before we stray and get lost. Take us where you want us to go. Teach us to renew the mission and ministry of your church. Amen.

### **Scripture Reflection: John 15:1-11**

Jesus says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

#### *Discussion Questions:*

What did you hear?

What does it mean to abide in Jesus?

What does it mean to have Jesus abide in us?

How do we bear fruit as a church community? What are the critical functions of this church community?

What does it mean to be disciples?

Compare Romans 11:13-24

### **Listening to God**

Jesus proclaims that we indeed need him as the source of joy and fulfillment in our lives. And yet we can grow within from the vine and be fruitful and be creative and "ask for whatever we wish" if we recognize and abide in God's love. The fundamental church health and growth principle is that our ministries flow out of a genuine *relationship* with Jesus Christ. The ministries we celebrate in our churches prove that "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

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).

How do we begin to center our lives in Jesus? The story of the transfiguration reminds us that we need to reorient ourselves to listen and respond to God. "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (Mark 9:2-9). Second Peter 1:16-21 says, "We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain." And then the epistle explains the significance of this experience: "You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." The lesson Peter learned from the transfiguration, and passed on, is to be attentive until you have this light in your heart! The kingdom of God has come so near that it may rise in our own hearts! Jesus is alive and present with us. Am I listening to him?

Listen to him! Even when God's revelation is in dazzling brightness and a voice from a cloud, God has to remind us to pay attention. How do we pay attention then or when God is more gentle – quiet or clouded as in 1 Kings 19:9-18 – when God is present in the sound of sheer silence or a still, small voice? God is always with us, but we often miss God. Instead we get caught up in our own concerns. God tells Peter simply to listen to Jesus. Don't be worrying and thinking ahead; listen!

This challenge of listening to God is hard. Steven R. Covey, the author of The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, describes the challenge of listening to understand another person this way:

The problem is that most of us tend to get into a very efficient state of mind. We have our own schedule. We know the things we want to accomplish. We think it through in our mind. We're under a lot of pressure. There are all kinds of things on our platter. We've got all these balls in the air we're trying to juggle. And it's tough. And that's the way modern life is. It's a rushing world. It's changing. It's chaotic. It's turbulent.

Well what do you do to handle that? You have to kind of figure it out and then be efficient and schedule yourself. And then carry out your schedule. The problem is that when you get into an efficient state of mind, you try to be efficient in your listening as well and you don't really take time to listen to understand, to listen empathically. See, empathic listening basically means you listen within the other's frame of reference. You listen within their world. Well look, if I'm into efficiency, how can I want to really open up to your world? Your world's so different from my world and I don't know what your world is going to show me. I don't know how open it is. I don't know how many dimensions, how many variables it has. I can't enter your world. I lose my efficiency altogether and that disturbs and imbalances almost everything else in my life. I don't want to be empathic! That's too much risk! I get too involved. I've got too many things going. I must be efficient.

So I learn to adopt certain techniques. I pretend to listen but I am still basically preparing my response. Why? I'm efficient. I give the impression I'm listening. I look

at you in the eye. I turn my head a little. I smile. I nod. I do other things to show I'm listening but I'm not really. Why? I can't risk it. I'm too vulnerable. Not just emotionally vulnerable because I'm unaware of what might happen and that I might have to change, but I'm also vulnerable in terms of my whole life. I'm not efficient any longer. I can't accomplish as much.

Covey concludes: "I know for myself, if I were to fault me at the highest point, it would be . . . on trying to be efficient with [others]. I've learned this. . . You have to get into a whole different frame of mind and then attach yourself to the higher values of really what's important. . . What is important? It's relationships!"<sup>1</sup>

We need to turn our focus from our own concerns to God and we need to listen carefully. In talking about empathic listening, Covey says "you have to get into a whole different frame of mind and then attach yourself to what's really important." This is the Christian message. The good news Jesus proclaims in each of the synoptic gospels is "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" The good news is that it is now possible for each of us to live in the presence and under the authority of God. How? By repentance.

Repentance is probably not what you think it is. Repentance is becoming empathetic to God. It does not mean the emotional experience of feeling bad about or confessing what I have done wrong. The word "repent" is *metanoia* from the Greek word for changing one's mind and heart. Covey defines repentance when he says "you have to get into a whole different frame of mind and then attach yourself to what's really important." God loves each of us and is constantly coming to us. We need to prepare our lives to live in an ever greater awareness of God.

Repentance is about finding ways to do what we need to do to listen and enter into relationship with God. Repentance is more than just realizing that we are not where we want to be; it is about the ongoing responsibility of structuring our new lives in a committed choice to live with God. Repentance is about changing our way of life by turning away from a distorted world view to focus on the reality of God and God's presence in our lives. Repentance is listening to God and preparing to live in God's presence.

When God calls us to listen, God is calling us to a change of heart, a heart that listens to God with empathy. That may mean focusing our prayers more on gratitude and listening than asking, participating in small group Bible studies, journaling, attending worship services and following other spiritual disciplines to help us open our hearts and pay better attention. "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

Listen! Listen to him! Be attentive until you have his light in your heart!

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<sup>1</sup> Steven R. Covey, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Families: Building a Beautiful Family Culture in a Turbulent World (Provo, UT: Covey Leadership Center, 1995) Four Tape Audio Learning System.

## Discerning Our Vocation

We have a special opportunity to come together during this retreat time to continue to discern and proclaim God's vision (mission, goals and strategies) for this congregation.

As leaders of a Christian church we primarily need to answer two questions: Who is God calling this congregation to be? And how is this congregation going to respond to that call? Answering these questions is important because this congregation can only know its identity by knowing what it is called by God to be and to do. If we know our true purpose from God, we can more easily decide which paths we are called to take on our spiritual journey. We can clearly say who this congregation is, who this congregation is becoming, and who might find a wonderful church home in this congregation. The visioning process is directly related to issues of identity and involves *becoming* what the church is *called* to be.

For many people it's surprising to learn that communities have a vocation just as individuals have a vocation. Our identity is the same thing as our vocation, or what God is calling us to do. Vocation is the same thing as our most genuine self. Because God has made us, God knows us better than we know ourselves and we are at our most authentic when we are responding to whom God calls us to be. Who God calls me to be will be consistent with who God made me to be.

To follow God's call, you need to know yourself. Santa Theresa of Avila, the great Spanish mystic, said there is nothing so crucial to the spiritual life as humility. ("Humility" comes from humus or soil and has to do with being rooted.) Humility is to know oneself in truth and to accept oneself in truth. To be rooted. Now it's important to note that a mystic, a person primarily focused on going to God says that you first must know yourself. So, true mystics are not disengaged from the world but know themselves because they know God. 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 ourselves.

These statements about vocation are true for a church community as well. We need to try to discover this self knowledge or common identity with how God created us. That's a big challenge because we cannot simply measure ourselves against some third party objective standard of what a church should be. 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. To respond to God's calling in the world, we need to identify and evaluate our circumstances: Where are we? Who are we? What is our current reality? Who are the people, communities or areas this congregation is called to serve. From this, we may understand a more specific vision of where God is calling us. Then we can develop a strategy for how we get there.

Obviously, this can't fully happen in just a few hours. It's often harder to discern our identity in community than individually. We have responsibility for more people. We have a broad spectrum of gifts to open and use in the body of Christ. (We need time to reflect on and pray about what we talk about.) We need more time to listen to each other and share.

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. This is going to be frustrating for some of us but we need to avoid the temptation to jump directly to a discussion of strategies. If we talk too early about strategy, we can rule out possibilities for ourselves too early. We can also keep ourselves from doing things we'd like to do by assuming they'd be too hard to do. We can't know in advance where our discussions will lead. That's up to you and the Holy Spirit. If we take this time together, we will all come to a clearer conception of goals and strategies. But it will take some patience and it will depend on everyone's participation because we don't know how the Spirit will work.

As we go through this discernment during this retreat time, we need to ask the same kinds of questions about the church that we might ask ourselves in our own personal discernment processes:

1. What are the gifts and abilities that God has given us? What can we do well (and in a way that pleases God)?

Talents, competencies, capacities; may be nurtured by education, practice.

God does not want us to deny these abilities but to use them for his glory. Question is will we make our abilities available to God?

2. What is our unique situation and what are the opportunities that we have?

Where are we in the world? Where can we go from here? What are the problems and possibilities we have? What are the choices we've made? What are our responsibilities? In a sense, what are our limits because of where we are right now? But also, what are our possibilities? We tend to think (or accept without thinking) that we're more limited than we are. So in these questions we need to be realistic (not negative) about our limits and imaginative of our possibilities. God will grant us a sense of who we are in response to the particularities of this time and this place.

3. What brings us joy?

Identify what are the desires of our hearts. What are we most passionate about? What energizes us? What do we long for?

Jesus said, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

Another way to ask this, is would we grieve if we didn't do this?

This is not something to be denied or deferred to another: the desires of your heart. This joy may not be immediate, but it needs to be fostered, nurtured, cultivated and we respond to God in that way.

#### 4. Where is our organization developmentally?

Some of these questions will be answered directly or indirectly in our discussions. They are all questions that it helps to ask all of the time. They point us to the ultimate question: Where is God present in this with 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, their real commonality and sense of purpose probably 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.

"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).

#### **Scripture Reflection: Beginning to Listen to God With One Another**

*Pick the New Testament verse below that especially speaks to you right now. Think about it personally, restating it in first person language. (For example, personalized the first verse might read, "When I ask, it will be given to me; when I search, I will find; when I knock, the door will be opened for me.") Tell the group why you chose the verse you did.*

"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." (Matthew 7:7-8)

"'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40)

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20)

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. (John 14:27)

I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace. (Acts 20:24)

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

So with yourselves, because you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church. (I Corinthians 14:12)

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (II Corinthians 3:18)

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (II Corinthians 5:17)

And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. (II Corinthians 9:8)

So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith. (Galatians 6:9-10)

The gifts he gave were to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-13)

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6)

I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:13)

"You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well." (2 Timothy 2:2)

“Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” (Revelation 3:20)

*Discussion Questions:*

- Are there common themes that are drawing us together as leaders of this community?
- Why are we here as the leaders of this church?
- What are the purposes of this church?
- What are our roles in helping the church fulfill its purposes?
- Do we have mission and vision statements? Do they adequately describe who we are (and who’s we are)?

**Goal Starters**

Some goals will come from fully answering the following questions:

- What does God seem to be calling the congregation to do at this time?
- What resources do we bring to the mission of the church in the area of planning and visioning and what resources do we need to bring?
- What outside resources do we need (skills, networks for sharing, consultants, workshops, training, funding, support)?
- What are the main goals of the church?
- When will they be accomplished?
- Who is responsible for accomplishing these goals?

- How are we going to test and strengthen our self-identity within the broader church community?
- What are ways to share this vision and gather further input (i.e., congregational survey with focus groups or follow up visits by leaders or larger church gathering)?
- How will the congregation formally adopt this vision (so it is celebrated, communicated, published and proclaimed frequently so that all church members can share in this identity)?

Goals might look like this:

<b>Goals and strategies</b>	<b>When</b>	<b>Whom</b>	<b>Benchmarks</b>
<b>Leadership Goal: Strengthen Our Christian Identity</b>			
Revisit our Mission and Vision Statements		Governing Board	Consider adding more specifics to discipleship, importance of empowered ministry of all believers and welcoming all
Develop expectations for members		Governing Board	Publicize in various media as reality rather than ethical/initiation requirement

*Consider using the other retreat outlines from this website to help you develop goals in specific areas of church life.*

### **Resources for Further Study**

Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean and Susan M. Ward, Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community. Morehouse, 1991.

Alice Mann and Gil Rendle, Holy Conversations: Strategic planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations. Alban Institute, 2003.

Ackerman, John. Listening to God: Spiritual Formation in the Congregation. Alban Institute, 2001.

Ackerman, John. Spiritual Awakening: A Guide to Spiritual Life in Congregations. Alban Institute, 1994.

Grenz, Linda and John Beckwith. Developing a Vision. Framington, Massachusetts: LeaderResources, 1996.

Johnson, Luke Timothy. Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.