

A reflection about the limits of human efforts

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the
magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the
Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future
promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in
realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference
between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own. ⁴

Ken Untemeyer, in honour of the martyr Bishop Oscar Romero.

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Spiritual Practice Sixteen

Discernment

(Part Two: Community)



God has made us what we are.

In Christ Jesus, God made us to do good works,
which God planned in advance for us to live our lives doing.

Eph 2: 10 NCV

“Practice” means the repeated performance of a task or action regularly over time. A spiritual practice is exactly what the word suggests, a way to be deliberate about matters of the soul.

“A godshaped life is a flourishing tree” Prov 11: 28

God's yearning

The purpose of spiritual discernment is knowing and doing God's will. God yearns for us to know *his* will for the world, for the church and for ourselves. In fact the words *yearning* and *will* are interchangeable.

Think of it as our yearning to know God's yearning. God wants everyone to know God's will. God offers us an Up Close and Personal relationship where the promise of discernment is that we can know and do God's will.

Decision-making and Discernment in a Group

Danny Morris and Charles Olsen originally wrote their book *Discerning God's Will Together: a spiritual practice for the church* ¹ for use by congregations, because they saw the limitations of business-led and parliamentary models. But lots of people found the principles useful for their personal discernment issues, so they included advice on that dimension in the second edition. Part One of Practice Booklet 16 covers that.

However we should not forget that their original intention was to guide congregations and small groups into a Biblically grounded and Holy Spirit-led way of agreeing on a way ahead for a faith community. This spiritual practice goes back over 300 years to the early Quakers who have much to teach us about their ways of seeking and listening to God.

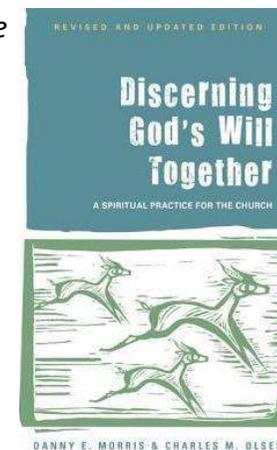


cleaning my glasses

When congregations or eldership teams are discerning together, we need to remember that we are not just looking for a Good idea, but for the Best idea, which is God's idea. One wise leader says "*Spiritual Practices help us remember who God is and who we are. Practising the disciplines is like cleaning my glasses. It restores fresh and clear vision.*" ³

References:

1. *Discerning God's Will Together: a spiritual practice for the church* Danny Morris and Charles Olsen (Alban Institute 2012).
(Much of this booklet has come from these authors.)
2. *A Spiritual Disciplines Handbook - practices that transform us* Adele Calhoun, (IVP. 2015) p 101
3. *Joy Together*, Lynne Baab, (Alban Institute 2012) p 155
4. *The Church Guide for Making Decisions Together* Terence Corkin, Julia Kuhn Wallace. (Abingdon, 2017, p 177)



This booklet is a companion to 16 Part One about individual discernment.

Useful Tests

- ◆ Use rigorous mental examination to write down the pros and cons for each alternative.
- ◆ List the likely fruits of each option - *by their fruits you shall know them.*
- ◆ Church father Origen suggests tracing the source of the each thought: God, the Devil or human ego?
- ◆ John Cassian Five Way test of the money changer: Is it filled with what is good for all? Is it heavy with the fear of God? Is it genuine in the feelings that underlie it? Is it lightweight because of inadequate motives? Has the burden of vanity diminished its lustre?
- ◆ Use the Jesuit practice of Examen, looking for consolation - a sense of peace and movement towards God or desolation - dis-ease and movement away from God.
- ◆ Practise silence and solitude and allow the Spirit to lure you to a particular path.
- ◆ Use Ignatian gospel contemplation to read John 14: 1 - 3 where Jesus offers to go ahead and prepare a place. In your imagination try to discover more about what he has prepared for this community at this time.
- ◆ Again in the imagination, take a trip to a chapel or a secluded meadow and invite a wise sage to join you. See where you end up!



Getting Started

The Dean of Trinity Cathedral in Sacramento takes a discernment approach to governance: *Since Jesus is head of the Church, he says, the Vestry's job is to discern His will. ... Since the Holy Spirit cannot be of two minds, our job on the Vestry is to discover, as best we can, His will for us stewards of His Church.*" (cited in Discerning God's Will Together.) Trinity Cathedral leaders realise that for this process to work, they must have tremendous respect for each other, and that means listening well...*"each member of the Vestry counts; no one is more important than another"*.

To know God's will we must be assured of God's love. Discernment depends on a deep trust in God's intentions toward us. Distrusting God's intentions and fearing that his will could be life-thwarting, rather than life-giving, can sabotage our ability to listen and wait for direction.

Indifference

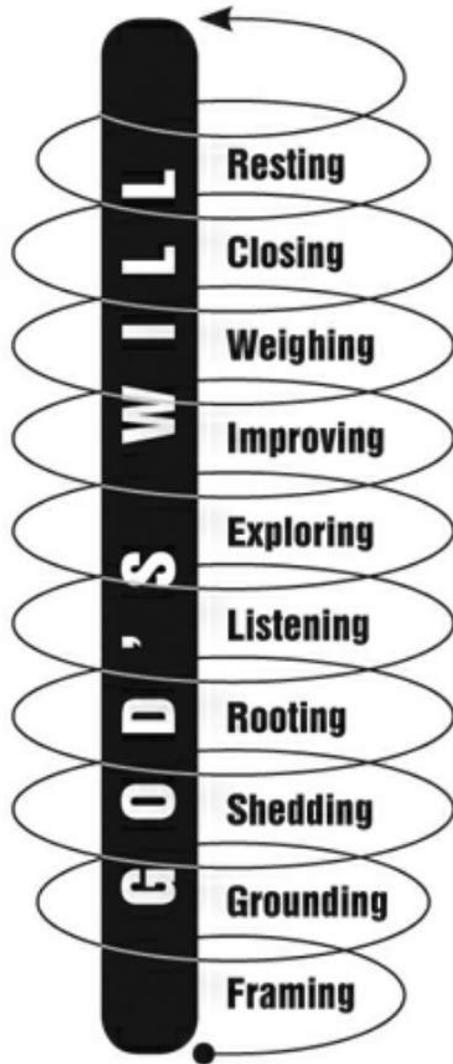
To discern well we need the Spirit of truth to open our eyes to attachments that influence decision-making - prestige, personal agendas, comfort, and so on. This is known as taking a posture of **indifference** - which doesn't mean not caring, but rather not being invested in a particular outcome. Calhoun offers this prayer of relinquishment: *"Lord we are willing to receive what you give, release what you take, lack what you withhold, do what you require and be who you desire. Amen."*²

Consolation and Desolation

Many Spiritual Practices can feed into congregational decision-making. Baab names worship, prayer, Ignatian gospel contemplation, fasting, gratitude etc. The Jesuit practice of Examen offers a particularly useful too - noticing the feelings of consolation and desolation. The first is when energising feelings of love, joy and peace appear in our hearts. The second is when we experience draining emotions of turmoil, confusion and anxiety. These leave us feeling chaotic and demotivated. Sometime there's no burning bush, but looking inside ourselves we might hear God speak.

Ten Steps Revisited

In Part One of this Practice Guide I introduced the Reflection Pool graphic. This one employs the same ten components, but in a different image. As with the lily pads, the steps can be skipped or revisited according to the context.



Framing is about coming to agreement about what is the issue and where are the boundaries of the discernment exercise.

Grounding is about finding a guiding principle rooted in the values of the faith community, eg *God's will in God's way*.

Shedding is identifying what must be laid aside to be truly open to God.

Rooting means finding a Biblical image or paradigm that can be used to describe the situation, eg *Exile, Resurrection, City on a Hill*.

Listening is asking whose voices need to be heard. Pray for openness to hear God in the voices of others. These may include people outside the group.

Exploring is where each person considers paths that could take the matter deeper. Look for options that notice and welcome God's presence.

Improving is where these paths are shared and consolidated into several agreed options.

Weighing is spending time in silence looking for how the Spirit is resting on one or more of the paths. Look for consolation or desolation as a guide. Or use one of the tests described overleaf. Then ask, *does this matter need more prayer and reflection, or are we ready to respond?*

Closing - the group regathers to seek feedback as to whether you are ready to take one option forward. Share individual responses without counting or voting; look for a sense of the meeting and work together on a more thoroughly-developed "minute" that expresses the "yearning" of God. Then ask each individual to describe their feelings:

1. *I like the minute as it is stated.*
2. *I am concerned, but will support the minute*
3. *I am uneasy ... reasons... but will stand aside.*
4. *I cannot support the minute.*

This should point the way forward.

If the group is stuck there are some possible next steps:

- Take further time
- Appoint one person to decide
- Vote, knowing that everyone has been included in the discernment process
- Drop it.

