

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 66 - APRIL 1998



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Discernment—connecting faith claims with church life

“There ought to be some connection between what a group claims to be, and the way it does things.”

That’s the view Luke Timothy Johnson expresses in his challenging book *Scripture & Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Abingdon Press, 1996). “The church claims to be a community of faith,” he observes, and he asks, “Is there any connection between this claim and its actual communal life?” Quite often, he finds, there isn’t.

Reading the book by Danny Morris and Charles Olsen that I quoted in last month’s *Connections* revived my long-standing feeling that a lot of our church meetings need to include some of the ingredients they describe as part of a spiritual discernment process. I was surprised to come

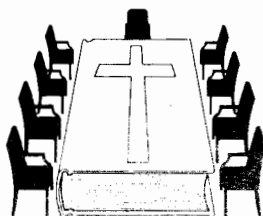


across Johnson’s book right after I’d read Morris and Olsen’s. Maybe that happened for a reason. Johnson uses a slightly different approach but advocates a very similar process.

Changing would be messy

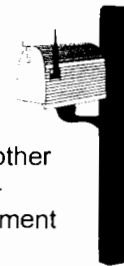
Johnson believes that if we want our actions to match our words we will begin using a discernment process for our church decision-making. “When the church makes decisions,” he says, “the Bible ought somehow to be involved.” Johnson is under no illusions, however, about the difficulty of changing to a discernment process. We hit huge snags when we think about the practical issues involved in doing it. These range all the way from how to involve the Bible to how to divide a large assembly into small groups and how to find the necessary time and meeting space.

“Practical thinking is messy,” says Johnson, a former Roman Catholic monk and priest who is



Readers respond

In response to last month’s *Connections*, in which I quoted from Danny Morris and Charles Olsen’s book *Discerning God’s Will Together*, both of those authors and several other *Connections* readers have sent interesting information and comments about using discernment processes in church meetings.



One reader writes that his United Methodist Annual Conference first used discernment for a major decision in 1995. “In spite of some resistance and some who did not find it meaningful,” he reports, “we found this spiritual discipline and approach to be so valuable that we have used it each of the past two years as well.” Like several other readers I’ve heard from, he says his Conference is training leaders in the use of discernment.



Full of story, scripture, prayer, and wonder

The Lay Leader of a new 200-member UMC congregation that is using discernment extensively writes, “We have never taken a vote except in the Church Conference when the District Superintendent was presiding.” This congregation is also using a method of helping members discover their spiritual gifts. The pastor is innovative, this layman emphasizes, and she has the gift of discernment. She is leading a group of members in a discernment process to discover the shape of their congregation’s ministry and to articulate their vision to the congregation and the local community. “Our first meeting last week,” this reader writes, “was full of story and scripture and prayer and wonder. Then your issue of *Connections* showed up. How affirming.”



Discernment is being recovered

Danny Morris says, “The movements of prayerful discernment are being recovered from the biblical, spiritual tradition of the church, but they will not be eagerly embraced, because they are unfamiliar and their fruits are generally unknown. ... The culture of Majority Rule will not naturally move over and make room for this new (old) practice ...” However, he knows of several Annual Conferences that are using discernment to some degree.

I may write about this subject again a few months from now. I’m still thinking about it and investigating.

a professor at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. "Practical issues," he observes, "have a way of cracking open the world of our presuppositions, and demanding of us a reexamination of our most basic perceptions." Using a discernment process for decision-making in the church would make us deal with messy practical issues constantly.

We'd have conflict, too. "Conflict is simply one of the faces of discernment in a community context," Johnson assures us, but that's evidently unavoidable when a group is really being the church.

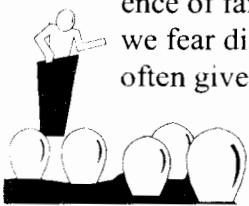


A family living with disorder and stress

"This process of discernment," Luke Timothy Johnson points out, "must occur in a public context that enables discussion, debate, disagreement, and decision." We tend to shy away from the disagreement part, but it's evidently essential because we're all human and therefore no one of us will see God's will perfectly. As Johnson puts it, "Opposition, openly expressed, is part of the decision-making process. It enables discernment to take place, by exposing the options to full view. It is part of the testing of the Spirit."



"The church will always be disorderly, a family living under stress," Johnson believes. "It will as a community always be in transition between partial closure and openness," he finds, "between the idolatry of institutional self-preservation and the obedience of faith in the living God." Because we fear disorder and conflict, however, we often give stability and institutional self-preservation higher priority than trying to discover and obey the will of the living God.



We pay a high price for doing that. We lose effectiveness as well as faithfulness.

Nancy Ammerman saw this loss in her recent study of congregations struggling with social changes, described in a recent issue of *The Christian Century* magazine ("Communities that change, congregations that adapt," by Richard H. Bliese; January 7-14, 1998). She found that conflict was characteristic of congregations that were reborn and growing, and that peacefulness was typical of declining and dying ones. "Attempting significant



changes will involve conflict," Ammerman observes, "and congregations unwilling to engage in conflict will not change." They won't stay alive, either, it seems.

Our decisions show what we're really like

Johnson reminds us that the church, like other groups, continually must decide what functions it will perform, and what its boundaries for membership will be. These decisions are made sometimes by merely following the path of least resistance, and sometimes deliberately. The threat of change often makes a group decide deliberately about a policy that has previously been based only on tradition or custom.



The way in which a group makes its decisions, Johnson assures us, tells more about it than its official rules, rituals, or public statements. A group may proclaim to be democratic, for example, but if its decisions are made by executive decree it is actually authoritarian. And the real decision-making process may be camouflaged. It's not always obvious.

Our decision-making expresses our faith

"The need for spiritual discernment in the process of reaching decision," Luke Timothy Johnson points out, "is derived from the very essence of the church's life." As Christians we claim to believe that as individuals and as church congregations and denominations we are responsible for discerning what God is calling us to do, and for doing it as best we can. We also claim to believe that God communicates with us continually through the Holy Spirit.

If we actually believed that, it seems, our church decision-making process would be based on deliberately trying to discover and understand what the Holy Spirit had to say to us. We'd use a process that recognized the special spiritual gift of discernment in some of our members and recognized that God calls and enables every Christian to do some discerning.



We need to see God moving ahead of us

Johnson cites the description of the early church in Acts 10-15 as a model for the discernment process he believes today's churches need to be using. In those



chapters of Acts, the church was deciding how to deal with the issue of expanding to include Gentiles. Unlike the Jews who were the first Christians, they did not consider circumcision and ritual food laws essential for becoming Christian. The underlying issue, Johnson observes, is, "How can we understand the actions of God that go beyond our previous grasp of the way God acts?"

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers ... were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles ... Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"
—Acts 10:44-47

That's still a very big issue for the church. It's confronting us right now in the form of Christians' widely differing views about whether homosexuality is a sin, for example, and about whether we should use all-masculine words for God. Questions like these push us to examine our assumptions about God's limits.

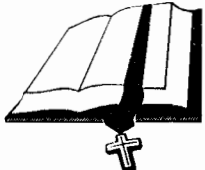


Essential parts of the process

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. ... After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "... God ... testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as [God] did to us ... " The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. ... James replied, "... This agrees with the words of the prophets ..."
—Acts 15:6-15

If we use the early church as our guide, we see that answering that question needs to be done through a deliberate process for discerning God's will. According to Johnson, the church through the centuries has consistently found certain ingredients vital. They're essentially the same ones described by Danny Morris and Chuck Olsen in their book from which I quoted in last month's *Connections*.

- Scriptures are read and interpreted, which relate to the discernment process and to the particular subject being considered.



- Worship focuses on hearing God's voice and discerning God's will.
- Speakers remind attenders how the church has experienced God's presence and discerned God's will in the past.
- Members tell how they have experienced God acting in their lives and in the group. These stories, Johnson emphasizes, must be structured accounts of personal religious experience. They are not mere collections of anecdotes or opinions. Neither are they what he calls "polemical pleading" or "the undigested stuff of daily life."



Johnson reminds us, too, that hearing these stories doesn't mean we must say yes to all of them. Some, he assures us, will be stories of sin and idolatry rather than of God's work or of faith, and the church must acknowledge them as such. That's part of the discernment we're responsible for. Also, Johnson believes, the church is not called to be an audience for what he calls "compulsive self-revealers" like those who appear on TV talk shows, or even for all the stories that might be shared in support groups or bonding sessions.



However, our use of discernment in hearing others' stories must include willingness to become aware of our own sin and idolatry too. "To be open to new ways of hearing God's Word," Johnson points out, "I must be critical of the ways my previous hearing has become closed and exclusive."



- Periods of silence are interspersed among the other steps, for prayer and reflection about what has been said.

All these parts of the discernment process will be intertwined. Some will happen in the full assembly, and others in small groups. Some parts will be repeated or will occur in different ways at different times during the process. Participants may move back and forth between the full assembly and smaller groups several times. The process may continue through more than one gathering.



Vitally important throughout the process is that all members, not just leaders, play active roles, and

that disagreements are openly expressed. "Tacit approval of every voice through fear of honest confrontation," Johnson assures us, "will make the church lose its identity as quickly and as surely as the rejection of every voice through fear of change."

Our main loss? The illusion of control

Many of us now regard silence as threatening rather than creative, Johnson realizes, and few of us know how to tell our stories as stories of faith experience. To use a discernment process, Johnson believes, we'd have to start in small groups and help each other past these obstacles. We'd also



have to keep using our present methods for a lot of decisions while we learned to use discernment.

Using discernment is messy and time-consuming, and it can be dangerous, Johnson readily admits. He fears, however, that continuing to rely on our present church decision-making methods is even more dangerous. And he asks, "What is it, really, that we could lose if we handed ourselves over to the discernment of faith? Would we really lose anything except the illusion of *control*?" Maybe that's not too much to risk losing.

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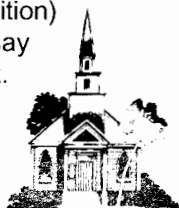
Discernment—connecting our faith with our church life

Topics coming soon in *Connections* . . .

 An interesting challenge—summarizing Christianity for a group that included members of other religions and of none, and Christians of many denominations. Being asked to do this made me reconsider what the essentials of Christianity are and how to express them.

▪ Does accentuating the positive require eliminating the negative? An old song that's recently resurfaced (and that even claims biblical support for its position) reminds me that in the church we tend to say "yes" to this question, but the Bible doesn't.

▪ What helpful insights can today's church members gain from John Wesley, the founder of Methodism?



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