

PAGE

CHRISTIAN DISCERNMENT

About Christian Discernment

Christian discernment involves distinguishing God's voice from other voices around us, in our culture, and in our heads. It involves prayerful examination of a variety of perspectives and possibilities with open minds and hearts.

In discernment, we care about the outcome, but more than trying to achieve the outcome we want, we are open to God's leading, whatever it might be. This requires trusting that God's Holy Spirit is present and will lead us, if we pray, listen, and open ourselves to God's leading.

Discernment is not democracy, nor is it about taking a particular course of action because we don't want to hurt someone's feelings.

Instead, discernment is about lovingly putting a variety of different ideas on the table for consideration, and then vetting them thoughtfully, without attachment to any particular outcome.

Ongoing discernment is important because we live in an era of great change, and the Holy Spirit is constantly on the move. Just because something worked in the past does not mean it will work today or in the future.

We must constantly reexamine our assumptions, means, goals, and motives. We must remain agile, like a sailboat, able to change direction quickly to catch the changing winds of the Holy Gust (Ghost).*

Discernment is one of the eight spiritual practices in St. Matthew's Way of Jesus. While our church has engaged in major, church-wide and in-depth discernment processes every couple of years, we've also committed ourselves to cultivating a culture of ongoing discernment. This means that we regularly evaluate what we think God is up to -- and how we are responding, or not.

We must regularly step back and take a prayerful look at all of our ongoing ministries. Is the congregation still energized about this particular ministry? Are there more life-giving ways of doing things? Might God be calling us to move in a new direction? What are the best uses of our time, talent, and gifts?

Even though it is easy (and understandable) for us to get attached to certain ways of doing things, faithfulness requires listening to God -- as well as having enough trust in God to respond to the Holy Spirit and change course when needed.

** This metaphor/insight about a church needing to be like an agile sailboat, able to catch the changing winds of the Holy "Ghust," is taken from Patrick Kiefert's book We Are Here Now.*

A Simple Process for Corporate Discernment at St. Matthew's

- Decide on a key question (or questions) on which the group will focus.
- Open and close with prayer.
- After the opening prayer, take 10-15 minutes to "dwell" in a passage of scripture. Read a short passage of scripture out loud (stories work well), observe a brief silence, and then invite people to share what captured their imagination – an image, a word, or perhaps a phrase. In this dwelling time, wondering questions are raised, but they are not answered.
- Allow group members to reflect, one by one, on the question(s) at hand. See below for ground rules to guide this reflection.

Some Ground Rules Conducive to Life-Giving Group Discernment

- Decide ahead of time if everyone must agree on a particular issue or decision, or if only a majority of group members must agree to move forward. If a majority, can those who disagree support the group's next steps or decision, as members of the church community?
- Turn off and put away all electronic devices.
- If possible, take a few minutes to center yourself and let go of the pressures and emotions of the day.
- Consider everything said in the group discernment process as confidential, unless the group decides otherwise.

- Open yourself to God's presence and leading, and come with great expectation that the Holy Spirit will work in and through group members, revealing something of importance to all of you.
- Once you have spoken, make sure everyone else present has a chance to speak before you speak again.
- Allow a period of silence after each person speaks, to consider what they said and allow the group to receive its meaning and respond accordingly.
- Give your full attention to others and what they are saying, rather than formulating your response while others are talking.
- Say what you need to say in this time of discernment, rather than afterwards to others (ie. no "parking lot" conversations!). Have enough respect for and trust of other group members to share different opinions and disagreements in this time of discernment. If there are no differences of opinion, it will be hard for the group to engage in discernment worthy of the name.
- Listen for words, themes, images, and metaphors that keep coming up.
- Pay attention to people's body language and tone of voice. Are there times in the conversation that people lean forward in their seats, get more energized as they speak, laugh together, seem to be thinking the same thoughts? These may be signs that the Spirit is moving amidst the group.
- Is the group able to come to a common mind after everyone has shared their concerns, objections, etc. (without "Minnesota nice")?

