

SEABURY-WESTERN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

TO HAVE THE MIND OF CHRIST:

SYMBOL GUIDANCE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF

COMMUNAL SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT PROCESSES FOR

PARISH LIFE, MISSION, AND MINISTRY

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CHAPTER 1

COMES FROM ABOVE, FOUND WITHIN

The advanced training group had been led in an exercise imagining Christ's presence at a meeting of St. Clement's Church. One member imagined the leader of the parish Food Pantry as the spirit of Christ at a vestry meeting. The topic the vestry discussed was the need for a mission statement. Phrases she heard associated worship, nourishment, and nourishing others. Then she offered a tentative statement, "We gather to receive nourishment so that we may in turn nourish others."

In another's meditation the caring and nourishing feminine dimension of Christ was present. The words "stay and serve" stuck with her. Christ's spirit allayed people's fears of diminished energy and admonished the group, "You can meet together anywhere – but if you meet here, you serve."

In the junior warden's meditation everyone on the vestry was worrying about little concerns. Christ pulled up a chair and said, "Don't sweat the small stuff—concentrate on what you know you need to do." "What about the diocese?" asked someone in her meditation. "I'll take care of the diocese!" replied Christ.

In the senior warden's meditation Jesus came as a soft loving light, like a flowing chiffon scarf. The feminine image surprised her. The people had many questions about the

liturgy and the search process for a rector. The Presence looked at them but left it up to the people to determine the answer. She still felt lack of clarity but it wasn't so distressing now. She didn't want to return from the meditation.

For another member the meeting was filled with doubt, "What are we going to do?" Everyone wanted to give their opinion. The Presence was like a mediator. This member of the group said, "He's not answering the question. You already know what to do." He felt the church has a call to reach out to the community. "We have a service to offer—but there's fear of stepping out."

"It was an annual meeting type of setting and the question was, 'What do we do now?'" reported the other member of the group. Jesus appeared to the gathering as overwhelming purple light. Then, replacing the light, everyday-looking people came and sat next to the parishioners. They talked about drug problems and about the need for a rector in a way that comforted "our people." There was a sense of peace, like a burden lifted, and a little child held her hand. The Light spoke out that they will be empowered to do even more. There was doubt, but the light got brighter. Words she associated with the meditation were: "Our growth in faithfulness means growth for the church."

Following this debriefing I invited the group members to sit with a question in contemplative prayer. When the silence ended a member shared this discovery, "*The answer to our questions comes from above but needs to be found within ourselves.*" Her disclosure is a fair description of spiritual discernment work within a community. In spiritual discernment we seek God's guidance in a matter of importance and so there is very much a sense that the answers or directions have an origin beyond us--a gift of grace that "comes from above." But spiritual

discernment also requires a profound inner work of prayerfulness that evokes the guidance of primary symbols which connect the discerning community to the great themes of Christian faith—so the “answer” or direction is found “within ourselves.”

Why This Study? Consultants to churches are more frequently being invited in to assist congregational leaders in dealing with such tasks as parish mission statement development, visioning processes, strategic and long-range planning, and conflict management. Many of the models for working with congregations that are used by trainers and consultants are based on systems approaches (e.g., Edwin Friedman, Peter Steinke), psychoanalytic models (e.g., W. R. Bion, Tavistock Institute), or borrowed from business organizational structures (e.g., John Savage). While these approaches make helpful contributions to understanding the dynamics of church life and decision-making, there is an increasing interest among church leaders to integrate prayer and Christian spiritual life into the tasks of leading a community. The rich tradition of communal spiritual discernment speaks to that interest and shifts the focus from business decision-making techniques to discovering God’s desire and direction for a faith community’s life, mission, and ministry.

Literature on Spiritual Discernment. Recent developments in the field of communal spiritual discernment include ways that a small community supports an individual in his or her discernment work, and ways that a church or other community can engage in spiritual discernment for its communal questions. Ways that the community can help the individual in discernment are addressed later in this study.

A theoretical work with clear corporate discernment implications is “The Powers Trilogy” by Walter Wink, Professor of Biblical Theology at Auburn Theological Seminary:

Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament; Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence; and Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination. Wink argues that every human institution or system has a spiritual dimension to it as well as a materiality about it--corporations, churches, nations, families, etc., all have a “spirit” or a “spirituality” that can be discerned. This is not easy because we are not culturally equipped to view reality in this way.

Wink suggests looking at such “outer manifestations” as: architecture and ambiance; economic class and income, race and ethnicity, educational level, age, and gender balance; the power structure, leadership styles, theological orientation, and attitudes toward authority; liturgical style, music, preaching, and educational program; how the congregation handles conflict; how the congregation sees itself and how others see the congregation; and those things that are more “on the fringe between seen and unseen” like sense of fellowship and friendliness, warmth or coldness, openness or closedness.¹ Then, after gathering information and impressions on the externals, Wink suggests using the imagination and affect to move into the inner reality of the spirit of the system.²

Other writers are now working to integrate discernment processes into the church’s business and planning activities. Two Roman Catholics are worthy of note for their labors in this field. Ann Elizabeth O’Hara Graff’s doctoral dissertation, “Vision and Reality: Discernment and Decision-Making in Contemporary Roman Catholic Ecclesiology,” provides an important

¹Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) , 73-77.

²A discernment exercise based on Wink’s suggestions on imagining the spirit/angel of a church or other organization is included in Appendix 2.

theological critique of that church's clerically dominated hierarchical structure in light of Vatican II documents and argues for much greater lay involvement in the structures of decision-making and for grounding the decision-making on spiritual discernment principles. Mary Benet McKinney, a Benedictine sister, shows the fruit of her practical experience working with communal discernment methods as a consultant to Roman Catholic parishes and religious communities in her book, *Sharing Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision Making*.

In the realm of Protestant mainline churches there also are noteworthy books on the subject. Danny Morris and Charles Olsen's *Discerning God's Will Together* provides a ten-step process for communal discernment. This book includes solid information on the rich history of spiritual discernment and discusses different ways discernment happens and what kind of support there may be for individual and communal focus. This book is accessible to the general population of readers in a congregation and is excellent foundational reading.

The Listening Hearts Ministries group led by Suzanne Farnham has published *Grounded in God* which addresses some of the dynamics of communal spiritual discernment and is, like Morris and Olsen, a good resource for broad congregational study. Pam Gregory's Doctor of Ministry thesis, "Dear God, we have no idea where we are going—" is an excellent application of the Listening Hearts Ministries approach to discernment of a congregation's life questions.

More specifically designed for leadership board decision-making are Charles Olsen's *Transforming Church Boards*, Roy Oswald and Robert Friedrich, Jr.'s *Discerning Your Congregation's Future*, and the work of Trustee Leadership Development (TLD) reflected in James Lemler's "Trustee Education and the Congregational Board." Olsen targets

transformation of church boards from business sessions typically marked by “bookend prayers” that get a meeting started and ended to “worshipful work” by a spiritual community, framing the *entire meeting as prayerful worship* that incorporates reflection on the church’s story in light of the “master stories” of scripture and discernment of issues facing the community.

For about six months I moderated an e-mail newsgroup meeting on Ecunet focused on “community discernment practices.” The discussion from congregation leaders showed particular enthusiasm for Oswald’s “worshipful work” model and high regard for Oswald and Friedrich. However, some pastors showed frustration in trying to get their church boards to make the big change in time and spirit to a “worshipful work” pattern. The theory is sound, and the results can be transformative, but with some boards the bar is set too high for them to make the jump. Most boards probably need beginning and intermediate levels.

Oswald and Friedrich provide a detailed process with solid resources to assist leaders to engage in strategic planning for congregations and draw on Olsen for the discernment principles used in their work. Their work is very useful for specific projects in mission development and visioning. However, it does not serve as a guide for ongoing processes within the community.

Lemler’s presentation of church board leadership development issues strongly supports the responsibility of the leaders to hold the congregation “in trust” and gives important emphasis on a servant leadership model. The “depth education” process for the board highlights four dimensions of ongoing congregational life in a cyclic pattern: history, mission, publics, and future. Although the TLD approach doesn’t focus primarily on the work of communal spiritual discernment by or through church boards, it would work compatibly with a discernment process.

Contributions of This Study. This study shows that the use of symbol guidance in the context of communal spiritual discernment processes is an effective spiritual direction resource for church congregations as they seek to discover and deepen their understanding of God’s desire for their life, mission, and ministry as communities of faith.

This study makes three new contributions to the work being done in communal spiritual discernment. First, it presents a flexible process for incorporating communal spiritual discernment into the life of the church community. This process can provide community support for individuals in their discernment work as well as provide trained leaders for the community in discernment of its direction. Discernment leadership for the community can be offered through an advisory group to the official decision-making structure or the vestry/board itself can be the discernment group.

Second, the study presents “symbol guidance” as a helpful tool for discernment. I have been influenced by the theological work by Paul Ricoeur and Sallie McFague in the power of symbols and root metaphors. Anthropological contributions by Arnold Van Gennep, Clifford Geertz, and Victor Turner have also shaped my understanding of the power of symbols and rites. Carl G. Jung and depth psychology, with its application in active imagination, have added another dimension to my understanding of symbols and archetypes. Christian dreamwork theorist-practitioners such as John Sanford, Morton Kelsey, Jeremy Taylor, and Kelly Bulkeley have given me a specialized focus in the way dream symbols work to provide individual and communal spiritual guidance. The work of Elizabeth-Anne Vanek in image guidance for individual spiritual direction helped me realize how central symbols are to the process of discernment and how often I have relied on the emergence of symbols in my own work in

spiritual direction. My training and practice in the field of spiritual direction synthesized these various influences into a working understanding of symbol guidance in the service of both individual and communal discernment.

Third, the study presents a theoretical framework, which I call a “spiritual discernment cycle,” for the steps involved in both individual and communal spiritual discernment. This builds on attempts by writers previously mentioned to show a pattern of movement through stages in the spiritual discernment process. This model recognizes the centrality of prayer and openness to primary symbols throughout the process. The model also has the advantage of having enough similarity to creative processes of problem-solving in the business arena to be more easily understood than the more complex model presented by Morris and Olsen or a less specific model like Listening Hearts’ work with groups. Further, I believe this model has the versatility of applying to individual as well as communal discernment work.

This study is not intended for consultants alone. Parish clergy and lay leaders, as well as judicatory leaders, are the ones who are expected to exercise their leadership in a way that honors the rich Christian spiritual tradition of prayer, meditation, and discernment and integrate it into the fabric of the decisions of policy and direction that the faith community is called to make again and again. Other members of the church community bear the God-given desire to be spiritual supports for members in the life choices that they make.

Research Method for the Project. For this project I served as a consultant-spiritual director to a parish and functioned in the roles of spiritual formation leader to the congregation and spiritual mentor to its leaders to introduce and equip a cadre of congregational leaders for the art of spiritual discernment. The “pro-active method” of qualitative research was used for this

project; that is, not only was my role to observe the parish under study (an ethnographic study) and to be part of a parish that I was studying (participant-observer case study), I was also expected by the congregation to be an active agent of change in the life of the parish.³ I used a combination of types of data to track developments and assess the effectiveness of the training and discernment process in the congregation: two open-ended questionnaires to survey the perceptions of parish participants, group interviews of the participants, data gathered from the field site, email correspondence (including group correspondence), summary notes of recorders of meetings, audio taping of sessions, and maintaining a project journal. Because I had already served as a consultant to the parish, I already had extensive background data.

Definitions. There are some terms that should be defined for the purposes of this study. By “symbol guidance” I mean a contemplative awareness of, and response to, symbols that arise from the church community which affects the consciousness and direction of that community. This study will show ways that symbols arose and served as guides, sometimes very powerfully, to the people of St. Clement’s Church.

“Spiritual discernment” means to disclose, uncover, or discriminate between the forces underlying an issue or choice of directions and to seek as much clarity as possible as to what path or direction God would have for the individual or community. Suzanne Farnham and the Listening Hearts Ministry group write, “Spiritual discernment is a prayerful, informed, and intentional effort to distinguish God’s voice from other voices that influence us.”⁴ Danny Morris

³William R. Myers, *Research in Ministry*, with an introduction by W. Widick Schroeder (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1993) , 29-33.

⁴Suzanne G. Farnham, Stephanie A. Hull, and R. Taylor McLean, *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1996) , 1.

and Chuck Olsen suggest that the experience of spiritual discernment requires us to shift our primary focus from our perspective to that of the divine reference point: “[To] see to the heart of the matter with spiritual eyes; from God’s vantage point, to see beneath the surface of events, through illusions within human systems, and beyond the immediate and transient.”⁵

Mention should also be made of the term “communal spiritual discernment.” By this term I mean that the church community is seeking to discover God’s will in matters of its life, mission, and ministry as a whole as well as in support of its individual members. In a Christian context all spiritual discernment is essentially a work that should involve the faith community to some extent. Sometimes the community is in support of the individual member’s discernment of God’s call, sometimes the community is focused on God’s call to the community as a whole.

Basic Assumptions. My theological perspective can be primarily understood as post-modern but held in tension with a valuing of the rich spiritual traditions that the Church offers and an expectation that the Holy One desires to guide us into the deeply creative possibilities that can be discovered in the concrete circumstances of our lives as individuals and communities. I speculate that there are dimensions of meaning and “reality” that are constructions by faith communities in interplay with our ever-creative and co-creating God. I also imagine a kind of fluid “meta-reality,” an overarching shape of God’s continuing and evolving dream for humanity, the earth, and the cosmos. This “meta-reality” is not a fixed, objective reality. It is more like Life continuously and lovingly envisioning new potentials and possibilities for fulness. Discernment from this perspective is a process of discovering the deepest meanings and creative

⁵Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1997) , 21.

actions evoked by the community or an individual within the life of such a community. The discernment process is often an experience of finding a direction (what I will call “God’s direction”) that is authentic to the discerner and creates, if you will, a set of meanings and a course of action that is suitable to the circumstances and consonant with the faith tradition.

I hold to the tripartite sources of authority that are typical of Anglicanism: authority and God’s direction for our lives can be found in the combination and dynamic interplay of Holy Scripture, tradition, and reason. I engage Holy Scripture in a dialogical way – drawing on the Benedictine practice of *lectio divina* and the Ignatian meditative tradition—imaginatively and contemplatively seeking to encounter the “living Word” through the story narratives, parables, metaphors, and symbols. The capacity for employing reason also involves the use of insights I might gain from the disciplines of psychology and anthropology as well as my primary fields of study in the ministry areas of spiritual direction, church development, spirituality, and theology. Tradition calls me to honor and draw upon the rich spiritual resources of the Church, knowing that those treasures need interpretation and sometimes translation for effective contemporary application.

Given this orientation, I want to make clear the following particular assumptions that influenced this study:

1. God desires interrelationship with individuals and communities in contemporary times.
2. God seeks to provide directions for a faith community’s (and for individuals within the community) most authentic development, which the spiritual tradition calls the “will of God.”

3. Individuals and communities can learn how to more sensitively discover God's direction for them, which in the tradition is called "spiritual discernment."
4. The Church has as part of its tradition various tools for spiritual direction and discernment that can be applied to contemporary needs for communal spiritual discernment and decision-making.
5. God often communicates through a combination of receptive and imaginative forms of prayer, formational use of scripture, and the emergence of primary symbols through such sources as dreams and active imagination as well as leading through the ritual power of the sacraments of the Church.

Shape of This Study. The second chapter of this study presents an historical overview of spiritual discernment, some contemporary applications of spiritual discernment for individuals, and the model of the spiritual discernment cycle. In the third chapter the communal spiritual discernment project is described. Then reflection on the project and its implications for the broader Church are offered in the fourth chapter.

CHAPTER 2

LANDMARKS OF SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

The landscape of spiritual discernment is vast and rich in history and contemporary application. Indeed it is far too rich and vast to address comprehensively here. Some landmarks are viewed rather than attempting extensive travel in its various territories. At the end of this chapter I will describe a process of engaging spiritual discernment today that integrates many elements from our map of landmarks.

Discernment in Hebrew Scriptures. Like the rest of the ancient Middle Eastern world, ancient Israel used divination practices to try to discover a right course of action, although the practices were often condemned or criticized (Deut. 18:14; Ezek. 13:4-7; 22:28). The casting of sacred lots (variously called *Urim and Thummim*, *the ark*, or *Ephod*, 1 Sam. 14; 1 Sam. 30:7-8; and Num. 27:21) was used by the priests of Israel, probably employing a question and answer format. The work of divination was not exclusively the realm of the Levitical priesthood, although they had access to the sacred sites and would be often consulted for their oracles derived from the officially sanctioned use of the Urim and Thummim.

Another group of seers were the prophets, who grew in importance from the eighth to sixth centuries before the common era. Some would be in prophetic guilds or bands (1 Sam.

10:5, 19:20) and others, like Amos, disclaimed connections to guilds but felt the irresistible movement of God to prophecy (Amos 3:8).

It was not just the priest with cultic tools for discernment or the prophet with ecstatic consciousness coupled with acute intuitive and interpretive powers that provided God's direction for Israel. These seers and others of the community – the teachers and elders and rulers – minister among a whole people of God who have been met by God coming to them in various ways. In the Hebrew scriptures we see the formation over time of a people being shaped by their interaction with the God who desires to lead them. Discernment is as much a communal responsibility as it is a personal undertaking.

Discernment in Christian Scriptures. The gospels present people who desired to know and be shaped by God's purposes. In the infancy narratives we read of Mary's encounter with the angel and "yes" to God's purpose in the birth of Jesus. Elizabeth's inner knowing of Mary's blessedness at the visitation is an instance of discernment. We learn of magi who follow the sign in the heavens, the holy star, to the site of the new King – and heed the angelic warning against Herod. We read of Joseph's openness to dream revelations about the nature of Mary's pregnancy and ways of protecting the divine child from Herod. Old Simeon the priest and Anna the prophet revealed the uniqueness of the infant Jesus.

John the Baptist picked up the mantle of prophetic tradition and ascetic discipline. He was empowered by the Spirit of God to challenge the system of privilege and power in its unethical and immoral conduct, called for repentance and righteous living, and proclaimed Jesus as the long-awaited messiah.

Jesus lived in complete unity with God, and his life is the exemplar for spiritual discernment:

Jesus discerned the heart of God. He was named God's beloved son, and his baptism provided a foundation from which to discern the spirits. When he was driven into the wilderness to be tempted, he saw through illusions of power, fame, and possessions and chose servanthood, humility, and poverty. Seeing clearly the kingdom of God, Jesus told stories that cut to the heart of human self-deception, illusion, and desire. Jesus was a sage, embodying the heritage of the wisdom tradition. His passion and faithfulness presented a criterion for discernment and offered good news for the poor and sinful.⁶

Jesus drew a band of men, women, and children to himself and taught them by word and works to seek and know what is involved in the reign of God. He shaped people into a community that desired to know and do the will of God. The disciples, in their shaping as apostles of the good news of Jesus Christ, gradually discerned the identity of Jesus as the Christ of God and that through him the will of God is revealed.

In the Acts of the Apostles we begin to see spiritual discernment in relation to the formation, empowerment, and mission of the early Church. The experience of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the 120 men and women gathered in the upper room in the house in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost points to the beginning of the fulfillment of the hopes of Joel's prophetic hopes five centuries earlier (Acts 2). On four separate occasions, the church in Jerusalem sought to discern God's will: the enrolling of Matthias as an apostle (1:12-26); the selection of the seven for a special ministry of service (6:1-6); Peter's defense of the ministry to the Gentiles (11:1-18); and the council of Jerusalem's decisions about admission of Gentiles into the Church and mission efforts to the Gentiles (15:1-29).⁷

⁶Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together*, 24.

⁷Ibid., 24-25.

The Pauline epistles give further glimpses into discernment elements in the newly developing churches. To the Roman Christian community Paul used the language of self-offering as a prelude to a transformation that could renew their minds and give them the ability to discern the will of God:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 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.⁸

Paul urgently contrasted a state of consciousness, values, and expectations – a radically new worldview and way of life – reflective of those living within the realized eschatology brought in by the Christ event and gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism, with the state of those who live according to the old worldview. In his first letter to the Corinthians he contrasted that old “spirit of the world” with the new “Spirit that is from God” in the context of discernment and the radical communal claim that “we have the mind of Christ.”

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God’s Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else’s scrutiny. “For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.⁹

Paul catalogued various “gifts of the Spirit” in his letters as representative of the variety of ways God empowers the baptized for the building of the Church and for the common good. Among the gifts are several that relate to aspects of spiritual discernment: prophecy, discernment

⁸Romans 12:1-2. (All citations of Scripture are from the New Revised Standard Version.)

⁹1 Corinthians 2:12-16, cf. Romans 8:9.

of spirits, wisdom, and knowledge.¹⁰ All of these particular gifts provide the Church with directions or guidance received from the exercise of an intuitive encounter with the Spirit of God.

The Desert Elders. From the fourth to sixth centuries, following the Christianizing of the empire by the actions of Constantine, an ascetical movement began that laid the foundation for monasticism. Christian men and women moved into the solitude of the harsh desert wilderness outside such major centers as Alexandria in Egypt.

The desert became the harsh testing ground for a deep and authentic Christian life focused on purity of heart and the desire to see God. Where the earlier Christians faced persecutions from a harsh human empire that would test their capacity for faithfulness and martyrdom, the desert took Christians to the habitat of the demons where they, like Jesus who was tempted in the wilderness, would do inner spiritual battle and discover God's sufficient and victorious grace. This contest in the desert required introspection and an awareness of the roots of consciousness as well as spiritual tools for discerning the spiritual influences on developing thoughts and prayer.

Some of the solitaries that moved into the desert became particularly known for their holiness, and other monks clustered their huts near these *Abbas* and *Ammas*, seeking spiritual counsel and occasional community worship. St. Athanasius (c. 295-373) wrote *The Life of Antony* in honor of one of the early hermits and great saints of the desert whom Athanasius encountered in his own lifetime. In his struggle for holiness Antony (d. 356) spent a lifetime battling the demonic forces within and around him and drawing upon the grace of God through

¹⁰The gift of prophecy is listed in all four major catalogues of spiritual gifts: Romans 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-11; 1 Cor. 12:28; and Ephesians 4:11. Discernment of spirits, wisdom, and knowledge are mentioned as gifts in 1 Cor. 12:4-11.

Christ to strengthen him and give him the victories. There are great difference between demons, Antony taught, but such distinctions are most clearly understood by the gift of the discernment of spirits:

Therefore much prayer and asceticism is needed so that one who receives through the Spirit the gift of discrimination of spirits might be able to recognize their traits--for example, which of them are less wicked, and which of them are more; and in what kind of pursuit each of them exerts himself, and how each of them is overturned and expelled.¹¹

The desert tradition of the *Abbas* and *Ammas* taught that thoughts arise from three possible sources: God, human memory, or demonic influence. Discernment and right action begin by following each thought back to its source and acting accordingly.

Benedictine Spiritual Tradition. St. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-c. 550) drew up his monastic *Rule* about 540 for the monks of Monte Cassino, based on several earlier sources. In his *Rule*, Benedict offers a lovingly and economically articulated way, steeped in Holy Scripture, of forming a community intended as “a school for the Lord’s service.”¹² Chapter 3 of the *Rule* “Summoning the Brothers for Counsel” gives directions on the way the monastery should make major decisions:

As often as anything important is to be done in the monastery, the abbot shall call the whole community together and himself explain what the business is; and after hearing the advice of the brothers, let him ponder it and follow what he judges the wiser course. The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger. The brothers, for their part, are to express their opinions with all humility, and not presume to defend their own views obstinately. The decision is rather the abbot’s to make, so that when he has determined what is more prudent, all may obey.

¹¹Athanasius, *Athanasius--The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, translated with introduction by Robert C. Gregg, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980) , 47-48.

¹²St. Benedict of Nursia, *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed. Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1981) , RB Prologue 45.

Nevertheless, just as it is proper for disciples to obey their master, so it is becoming for the master on his part to settle everything with foresight and fairness.¹³

This chapter in the *Rule* is the heart of the Benedictine community's discernment process.

Benedictine decision-making requires a careful and sensitive interaction between the abbot or prioress and the community. Comments Sr. Joan Chittister on RB 3:

In the monastic community, this common search for truth is pitched at a delicate balance. The abbot and prioress are clearly not dictators, but the community is not a voting bloc either. They are each to speak their truth, to share the perspective from which they see a situation, to raise their questions and to open their hearts, with honesty and with trust. The prioress and abbot are to listen carefully for what they could not find in their own souls and to make a decision only when they can come to peace with it, weighing both the community's concerns and the heart they have for carrying the decision through. "Foresight and fairness" are essentials for leaders who lead out of a sense of Benedictine spirituality.¹⁴

The Benedictine values of humility, balance, simplicity, moderation, community, work and prayer, and lives shaped by *lectio divina*; and vows of stability, obedience, and ongoing conversion provide the context for discernment.

Ignatian Spiritual Tradition. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Society of Jesus, wrote the *Spiritual Exercises* beginning with his stay in Manresa in 1522-1523. During an extensive period of recovery from a leg wound received in a military siege, Ignatius focused on the life of Christ and the lives of the saints, and underwent a conversion, desiring to be a soldier of Christ. The *Spiritual Exercises*, which were revised and enlarged upon throughout his life, reflect Ignatius' desire for deepened commitment to Christ and discernment of the vocational path that Christ calls forth in a person. The *Spiritual Exercises* are designed classically for a

¹³Ibid., RB 3.1-6.

¹⁴Joan Chittister, O.S.B., *The Rule of St. Benedict: Insight for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 48-49.

four-week directed retreat making use of scripture, imagination, affect, and meditation. The *Spiritual Exercises* also include the important “Rules for the Discernment of Spirits,” a collection of guidelines for discernment that focus on the affective movements *toward* God or *away* from God, influenced by good or evil spirits.¹⁵ The *Exercises* give particular guidance on making an “election” or choice of a state or way of life.

The Deliberations of 1539 and the subsequent formation of the Society of Jesus represented an important attempt to apply spiritual discernment to a communal situation. Ten companions, including Ignatius, had taken vows of poverty and chastity and sought a sense of common mission and service. However, their individual callings to mission were taking them to diverse places. The question began to arise of making a choice between two goods: should the association of companions be dissolved and the companions be freed to follow individual calls to mission and ministry, or should the companions form a fixed society that would unite them even if they went to separate places? If the latter, should they take a vow of obedience in addition to their previous vows of poverty and chastity?¹⁶

The companions agreed to devote the weeks of the Lent and Easter seasons to deliberations on their choice of way of life. A fixed point for discussion and decision would be chosen for the evening. During the day, without interrupting their work, they would seek to discern the point by prayer, meditation, taking it to God at Mass, and formulating the reasons for

¹⁵David L. Fleming, S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises: A Literal Translation and A Contemporary Reading* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978) , 207-215.

¹⁶See Georg Schurhammer, S.J., *Francis Xavier: His Life, His Times*, trans. M. Joseph Costelloe, S.J., vol.1, *Europe 1506-1541* (Rome: Jesuit Historical Institute, 1973) , 454 ff. for a complete description of the events related to the Deliberations.

and against in preparation for discussion at the evening sessions. When the point was sufficiently considered, the solution should be adopted that was unanimously approved.

The Deliberations established some principles for group discernment. First, the decisions were made in a context of seeking to know God's will in the matter. Second, the major discernment was a choice between two good paths that had equal validity. Third, the group chose to allow a lengthy period for discernment to be made. Fourth, the members of the group were free to do their own searching and praying and then re-form as a group to share their findings. Fifth, the deliberations used a pattern of discernment that was shaped by daily Christian prayer, meditation, and sacramental worship, and took place amid the normal activities of life – yet with a special focus of intention. Sixth, the group sought unanimity. When a unanimous vote could not be attained on a later question for discernment, the group still held for a pattern that provided a period of time of waiting before taking a final vote.

Quaker Spiritual Tradition. The radical reliance on the Light within, the fiercely democratic ecclesiology, the importance of silence in Society of Friends meetings, and the trust that a “way through” can be found to resolution of problems is a tradition that goes back to the seventeenth century. Douglas Steere describes a Quaker business meeting:

The business meeting is presided over by a Clerk, who has been chosen by the Meeting for a term of office. His role is quite different from that of a chairman who with *Roberts Rules of Order* at his mental fingertips handles motions and amendments from the floor, calls for divisions, counts votes, and announces the result. . . He is a good listener, has a clear mind that can handle issues, has the gift of preparing a written minute that can succinctly sum up the sense of the meeting. . . [A] good Clerk is a person who refuses to be hurried and can weary out dissension with a patience borne of the confidence that there is a way through, although the group may have to return to the issue again and again in later meetings before clearness comes and a proper decision is reached. . . No votes are taken in a proper Quaker meeting for business. It is the task of the Clerk, within the plexus of this corporate

exercise, either to find resolution that is in right ordering so that the assembled Friends can largely agree with it, or to follow the Quaker rule “When in doubt, wait.”¹⁷

The “clearness committee,” a development in Quaker tradition designed for a community to help individuals or couples discern the call of God in a life situation requiring a decision. A selected clerk of the committee and some other invited members of the Friends gather with the person seeking discernment. The committee enters into silent prayer with the person and, from a prevailing environment of silent prayer, asks the focus person questions aimed at helping the person become clear about what God intends. All participants assume that God can and does communicate within a person, and that silent prayer and un-presupposing, loving questions help clear a way through the issues and cloud of confusion so the person can understand the guidance of the divine light.¹⁸

There are principles for spiritual discernment that can be drawn from these historical landmarks. In both Quaker and Ignatian traditions seeking consensus is an important discernment principle in their meetings. As in the Benedictine tradition, careful listening to all members affected by a situation is important in arriving at decisions. External attention to the needs of others should be accompanied by silent prayerful attention to the possible sources of inner thoughts, as in the Desert Elders tradition – while seeking God above all else. Many of these traditions place spiritual discernment in the context of a spiritually disciplined life of prayer, scripture, and sacramental worship. The Ignatian tradition places importance on the

¹⁷Douglas V. Steere, introduction to *Quaker Spirituality: Selected Writings*, ed. and introduction by Douglas V. Steere, preface by Elizabeth Gray Vining, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 38.

¹⁸Parker J. Palmer, “The Clearness Committee: A Way of Discernment,” *Weavings* 3 (July/August 1988): 37-40.

meditative use of imagination with scripture, and on paying attention to the discerner's affective state. In the Quaker tradition the use of a group to assist the individual in the work of discernment is important. In the other traditions spiritual directors help the individual in discernment work. Thus, in all traditions the work of spiritual direction is done in the context of a Christian community.

Examples of Contemporary Applications. Group spiritual direction processes are now developed for supporting the individual in the work of discernment. An example of this form is described by Rose Mary Dougherty, Director of Spiritual Guidance for Shalem Institute, in *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment*. In this model a small group composed of four or five people plus a facilitator, meet for about two and a half hours every four to five weeks. The participants take turns as presenter, sharing a situation in their life where they want to explore God's presence and guidance. After a period of silence the group provides prayerful responses and questions to the presenter. The facilitator watches over the group's process to assure a contemplative environment where the focus is more on the presenter than on the situation that the presenter gives. The primary purpose of the group is to assist the presenter in being conscious of the immediate presence of the Holy Spirit and responsive to the guidance that God provides.¹⁹

Spiritual support groups, whether parish-based or formed by participants across churches, facilitated by an experienced guide or peer-led, are also often resources for the support of individual spiritual discernment. Some are formed on a "covenant group" model, where the

¹⁹Rose Mary Dougherty, S.S.N.D., *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1995), 49-55, 98-100.

participants arrive at a consensus about the purposes for the group and ways they promise to support each other. Some groups use scripture or other subjects of meditation to help provide a focus, with participants responding from their own life situation and to one another in support of their discernment efforts. Carolyn Stahl Bohler's *Opening to God* provides excellent guided-imagery meditations based on scripture for use by an individual, group, or a whole parish community. Her debriefing reflections often provide group applications and can be a source of discernment insights and symbol guidance.

One popular process of engaging scripture for spiritual formation and discernment, rather than primarily for information, is variously called "African Bible Study," or "Oral Tradition Method of Bible Study," or "Base Christian Community Bible Study," or "Group *Lectio Divina*." The method apparently originated in South Africa, was picked up by South American Christian base communities, and then arrived in the United States. Its format is easily applied, and it is a fine resource for community support of personal discernment. It works well with a small group meeting weekly that can commit to an hour together. I have also developed a simple form of this for use by a larger community gathering, using table groups and then reporting findings to the whole community.²⁰

The "Clearness Committee" model from the Quaker tradition became the basis for a training program headed by Suzanne Farnham, originally called the Christian Vocations Project and later renamed Listening Hearts Ministry. This program has been training people at the diocesan level, who in turn are equipped to train local people to form discernment committees in parishes and deaneries. Currently, Listening Hearts Ministry has published a book addressing

²⁰See "A Simple Form of Group *Lectio Divina*" included in Appendix 2.

individual discernment, *Listening Hearts*, and a book giving guidance for group deliberations, *Grounded in God*, as well as some supplementary handbooks.²¹

The Spiritual Discernment Cycle

We began this chapter with the metaphor of noting some landmarks in the landscape of the history of spiritual discernment. I now would like to shift the focus to a map that I developed, called the “Spiritual Discernment Cycle” (Figure 1), printed on the following page. The cycle is a graphic representation of the terrain that typically must be traversed in making a spiritual discernment. The steps on the journey are not always sequentially followed. There can be movement back and forth between locations in the cycle, with an ultimate goal of making a discernment and testing the results. Reaching a discernment may result in the emergence of new issues or invitations from God for new discernment. This journey with God is lifelong!

Prayer, Meditation, Dreamwork: Awareness of Guiding Symbols. Located in the center of the chart and permeating the whole of discernment work is the prayerful dimension of living. There is a contemplative dimension to discernment where receptivity to God’s leading is valued and sought. We may move back and forth between the receptive silence, radical emptying, and holy mystery of the *apophatic* dimension of prayer; and the images, thoughts, and relational truths of the *kataphatic* dimension of prayer. Awareness of words that have power for us, phrases from scripture, visual images, music and lyrics, dreams, events that catch our attention, the way the sacraments shape us: these all hold the potential for being ways that God

²¹See Appendix 1 of *Listening Hearts* for detailed steps in a discernment group process based on the Clearness Committee model.

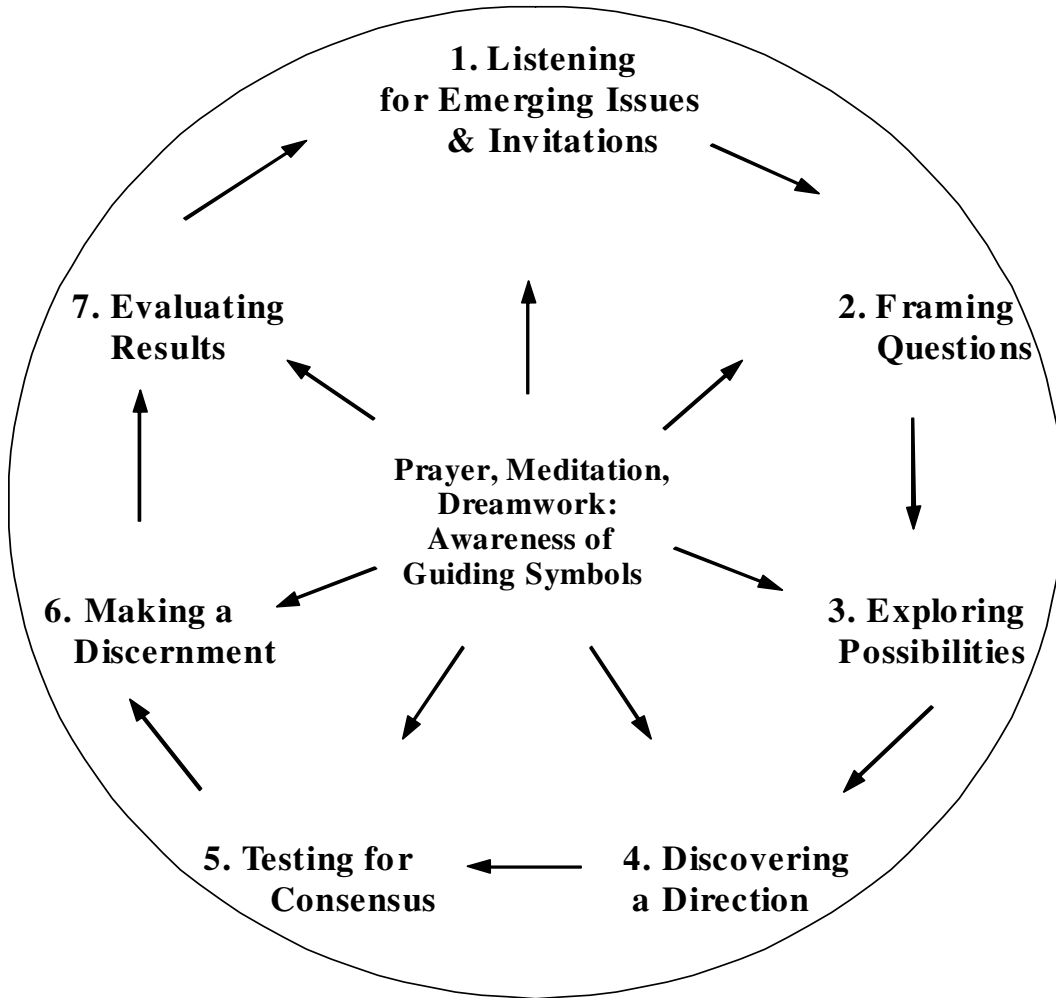
whispers to us of divine desire. A prayerful life cultivates an appreciation for the potential of

God

to

guide

Spiritual Discernment Cycle for Individuals and Organizations



Daniel Prechtel
Lamb & Lion Spiritual Guidance Ministries
(<http://lministries.homestead.com>)
4-4-2000

Figure 1

us through symbol-language. It also calls us to make ongoing discernment *within* the process of discernment by exploring such questions as: What is the source of this symbol that has emerged and holds power for me/us? Is it life-giving even while it might be challenging? Does it bring us beyond our selves alone? Does it speak to our deepest sense of truth? Does it seem consistent with our best understanding of God's great desires for humanity as revealed in scripture and in the wisdom of our spiritual teachings? Does it speak of the paschal mystery, the way of the cross and new life in Christ? By such questions we can test the symbol for its validity as a guide for us.²²

1. Listening for Emerging Issues and Invitations. Spiritual discernment is a conscious action and requires a stance of active listening in life, an awareness that the issues and experiences that catch our attention may include hidden within them an invitation from God for our faithful and deliberate response. Concrete life situations are the context for our discovery of God's desires and directions for our life and the life of our communities. For St. Clement's Church, the project site for this study, the emerging issue had to do with calling a priest. But underlying that issue were the invitations from God to own their grief and honor their healing needs, to become free to look at a variety of ways they can configure their ministry and common life, and to discover and articulate their deepest sense of who they are and what they are called to be prior to searching for a rector.

²²In this paper, the symbol is called a "primary symbol" if it serves as a guide to the life of the faith community.

2. Framing Questions. The kind of questions we ask give powerful shape and direction to our inquiry and set limits on the scope of our discovery. In order for spiritual discernment to occur we need to frame our inquiry and structure our path of discovery in a way that makes the search for God's direction central. So the kind of questions we ask makes a big difference! For example, if a church is experiencing a crunch in their budget it is one thing to ask, "What expenses can we cut and still maintain the highest quality possible in our church programs?" That question is probably familiar to many vestries, bishop's committees, and clergy. But that is a management-oriented question. A spiritual discernment-oriented question might go like this: "How might God want us to handle our budget? What might God wish us to emphasize in our financial stewardship?" The discernment-oriented question may take the governing body down a path of examining their sense of the mission of the parish and how that is funded, as well as looking at the policies and assumptions that shape their understanding of stewardship, faith, and fiscal responsibility, and how they usually go about seeking God's guidance in the structuring of their budget. It is much more likely that this kind of question will ground the exploration of the issue in a sense of God's presence in the community, and become an opportunity to discover God's desire for the community.

3. Exploring Possibilities. This phase of a deliberation is probably quite familiar to anyone who knows creative problem-solving techniques. It is a time for entertaining many possibilities, for brainstorming, for being open to the creative and new inspiration. Eventually the options are out in the open and it becomes time to narrow the possible directions down to a few that have a sense of deeper merit. Next all the available data is gathered for investigating the value and feasibility of each option.

Here is where the discernment tradition calls for something different than a business model or a decision based on a simple preference or inclination. The discerners are asked to pray for an inner freedom that seeks God's deepest good rather than our own personal preferences. Results of the investigation of possible options are shared completely and weighed based on that inner freedom of discernment.

4. *Discovering a Direction.* Eventually there may be a sense of clarity or a deeper sense of peace around a particular option. Things may seem to converge and a direction has a special sense of rightness, of blessing about it. Sometimes it seems perfectly clear to everyone that this choice is the right one, that God has revealed this direction to us. But more often we go into the selection of a direction with a sense that this one option seems to be the best of our choices, but we could be wrong. And others may disagree. Which leads us to the next step in the dance.

5. *Testing for Consensus.* In community life, as well as individual life, some things are just too important to ram through as a personal preference or have a majority vote decide. The spiritual discernment traditions in various ways emphasize the importance of group unity and cohesion and having a process that avoids win/lose types of decision-making. Major questions of policy, call, development of a congregational sense of ministry, deliberations about a church's mission – these are questions that call for consensus-building. Consensus does not necessarily mean unanimity. But it does mean that there is a sense that everyone that is responsible for the decision has been fully heard and their truth has been received.

In seeking consensus it can be helpful for the community to establish a policy (before attempting a particular discernment) about what percentage can be considered a minimum level

of consensus or else the community clearly needs to do more discernment work – and probably go back to an earlier step in the discernment cycle. The consensus means that to the best of our ability we have tried to discern the will of God in this matter and the amount of people requisite to establishing a consensus has been met.

People can have serious reservations about a direction and still abide by the wisdom of the consensus. If strong concerns are shown, it is important to enter the reservations in the record of the deliberations. The concerns that are expressed may prove prophetic and the decision may need to be revisited in the future in further discernment.

In individual discernment the idea of testing for consensus is not as formal, but the principle still holds that even as a person seeks the views of the community (church members, family, friends, spiritual director) in exploring possibilities (step 3) so it is important to seek input from the community after the person has made a tentative decision (step 4). Does this direction seem to fit well with others' views of you? If this decision affects others how might it impact them, and do they agree with your direction or at least can they go along with it? How many people do you need to hear concerns from before you consider that you may be on a wrong track?

6. *Making a Discernment.* Once consensus has been reached we can say that we have made a discernment. Hopefully the process has been done both with faith and with humility. Usually once a discernment has been made there is a sense of God's peace, which does not ignore challenges, and a release of creative energy for living into the direction. However, sometimes there is still quite a bit of uncertainty. That does not necessarily mean we have made a wrong discernment. We have to live into the mystery of our human limitations and the mystery

of God's purposes. If we have made a wrong discernment we will probably recognize it later and begin a new time of discerning, for God does not abandon us.

7. *Evaluating Results.* As we live into the direction we have discerned, it is important to take note of and evaluate the results of the discernment. Is this path, this direction, into which we are living, producing good fruit? What kind of emotional and spiritual climate is being generated by this direction? Is it giving us the results we expected or is something else happening? If concerns were expressed by a minority, is a situation emerging that justifies the concerns? Are new issues, new invitations emerging from this path that is calling for a new round of discernment?

And so you have it – a journey into the terrain of spiritual discernment with God and with your fellow companions accompanying you. It takes you to questions that touch the deepest parts of you and your world, and a way of living with those questions with a freedom and trust that is truly graced.

CHAPTER 3

THE COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT PROJECT

Context of St. Clement's Church. Driving for the first time up the street leading to St. Clement's Episcopal Church in the south Chicago suburb of Harvey, I was reminded of my years working for Michigan Department of Social Services in the distressed neighborhoods of Detroit. The neighborhood is generally run-down and the brick church is surrounded by a wrought-iron fence that is chained and padlocked when the church is not open. Often the front entrance gate remains padlocked and entry is made from the side of the church. The small church grounds are nicely kept with flower gardens, and the members speak of providing "an attractive place in the neighborhood that shows we care."²³ Kitty-corner to St. Clement's is a large Full Gospel church.

St. Clement's Church's present building was completed in 1922, although there has been a continuous Episcopal presence in Harvey since Mr. and Mrs. F. J. Phillips opened their home to a meeting on December 7, 1898. From 1898-1910 the church was named Harvey Episcopal Mission. From 1910 to 1953 it was St. Clement's Mission. St. Clement's Church moved from mission to parish status on May 15, 1953.

St. Clement's currently is a small family-size congregation. Where in the mid-1960's the church boasted 200 on a Sunday with three services, it now averages about 27 people in

²³Parish discussion recorded notes of March 5, 2000.

attendance on Sunday with one service. The parish currently has 67 members. Racial and ethnic diversity is a hallmark of the parish with people identifying themselves as Belizean, Nigerian, American, Jamaican, Irish, and Norwegian. In a parish meeting there was appreciation of their diversity and the individual's importance to the whole. Someone said, "We see the godliness in each other." The images that arose from the group at that meeting about their diversity were "salad" and "stew."²⁴ On a usual Sunday a little over half the congregation are "people of color." There are a few children and youth present. Financially, the parish receives about \$45,000 annually between pledges and regular envelope giving from eighteen to twenty-one pledging units. There is a \$10,000 emergency fund.²⁵

There are various forces that had a strong impact on the church over the past forty years. By the mid-1960's there was strong racial integration but also "white flight" began to have an impact. The first black family came to St. Clement's Church in 1959, followed in 1962 by the second black family.²⁶ During the late 1950's and early 1960's some of the members of St. Clement's fled due to the racial integration of the church and established Holy Name Episcopal Church in nearby Dolton (which closed in 1991 to the satisfaction of the remaining members of St. Clement's). At the end of the 1960's, with the commitment of the rector, the Rev. Thomas Brady, the church hosted neighborhood meetings for racial integration. Presently the parish region shows growing populations of Nigerians, Ghanaians, Caribbeans, and Hispanics,

²⁴Parish meeting notes of March 5, 2000. This meeting began by me leading them in a guided imagery meditation about discovering the hidden treasures of St. Clement's Church.

²⁵Income and total membership figures based on notes of Annual Parish Meeting of February 4, 2001 and notes of the parish meeting with the Rev. Sheila Ferguson on September 16, 2001.

²⁶There is some question about whether there was a black family prior to this according to discussion during the parish time line exercise and historical notes in preparation for that exercise.

according to Percept data from the diocese.²⁷ From the 1960's to the mid-1980's the city of Harvey lost much of its major business and industrial tax base as well as employment opportunities due to business closures and moves. Harvey was experiencing economic devastation. The city has been undergoing a very slow economic recovery since then.

Food is an important item that should be included in introducing the character of the church. This description is in their brochure under the heading "Outreach Ministry":

Members of St. Clement's assist in feeding over 100 families a month with our Food Pantry. This is no small task as it necessitates receiving food in bulk and dividing the food into shopping bags. Even our tiniest members volunteer enthusiastically. On our pantry days, our gently used clothing and household wares are available for clients. During the holiday season, in addition to the usual groceries, a holiday dinner basket is distributed to each family.

The Food Pantry began on an informal basis in 1985, then was formally organized in 1990 and received its first grant from the diocese. The woman who led the organization of the Food Pantry continues to be the anchor for that ministry, although others help provide leadership. The hands-on preparation and service to clients is broadly shared in the parish.

The people of St. Clement's consider themselves Anglo-Catholic, at least the most vocal of them, who probably represent a large majority of active participants. Some of the parishioners, however, especially those of African background, are quite comfortable with a more Evangelical approach to worship. This may represent a tension in the diversity of the community. The Sunday eucharistic celebration is called the Mass. The normal liturgy begins with "A Penitential Order" of Rite II. There is a gifted organist-choir director who works very effectively with a small choir that leads the sung liturgy. St. Clement's has a seven-rank Moeller

²⁷Parish discussion notes, April 2, 2000.

pipe organ that is a treasure of the church. The Lord's Prayer that is regularly sung by the congregation was composed by the organist-choir director and displays some African-American musical influence. The *Agnus Dei* is always sung as a fraction anthem at the liturgy and usually *Christ Our Passover* is also sung. The choir has special parts that they regularly sing in the liturgy. Normally one to three acolytes serve at Mass. At the recitation of the Nicene Creed the congregation kneels at the mention of Jesus Christ's incarnation. Sanctus bells are used and high festival days may include incense.

The church interior is typical of earlier 1900's architecture and Anglo-Catholic layout. There are fixed pews and stations of the cross on either side of the nave. In the sanctuary there is a large wooden crucifix front and center with a presider's chair underneath, flanked by a tabernacle with sanctuary candle on the left and a small *Christus rex* with a votive candle on the right side, a free-standing altar in the center, with a bell at the sacristy entrance to the sanctuary. In the back of the church nave is a baptismal font in one corner and the organ on the other side. Between the font and the door entranceway (narthex) is a blue banner with a large anchor and the words "St. Clement's Church, Harvey." Near the front on the left side is a large votary with a statue of Mary Queen of Heaven seated on her throne and the child Jesus on her lap. Other banners, besides the church banner, are present. From the rear balcony hangs a seasonal banner. In the sanctuary reside four banners each with their thematic symbols and named as faith, joy, peace, and love. The central "peace" banner displays a lion and lamb lying together – the lion is golden-colored and the lamb/sheep is black. The banners were made by a parishioner who is no longer present and is missed.

Almost everyone follows worship upstairs with coffee hour downstairs. This is the time when people sit at their spots at tables and visit while eating donuts and drinking coffee (with fruit beverages for the children). Announcements are made at coffee hour and usually include something related to the Food Pantry. The downstairs area includes a kitchen and a large open meeting area with tables and chairs which is the site of coffee hour. In the main meeting area against the back wall are large institutional-sized refrigerators for the Food Pantry, and one corner has donated clothing on racks that are distributed to clients in need. Other rooms downstairs are used for storage.

When I was first invited to this church in the autumn of 1999, I came as a consultant to help them look over their parish history in preparation for a search process for a new rector. The parish conversations that were generated from the history review raised questions about the degree to which they had gone through resolving their grief over several major losses in 1994. In that year within a period of about six months a key parishioner, Peter,²⁸ and their rector of thirty years, Father Brady, left the parish. Peter, who had been a major influence on the parish and whose family was very active in parish life, became ill and died. Then Father Brady's health worsened (he had experienced health problems for some time already) and he needed to take an early disability retirement. His retirement announcement came unexpectedly, although people were aware of his health concerns, and the community memory is that there were only about four to six weeks from this announcement until he left. People felt ill-prepared for his leaving and for carrying on parish life (including the details of administration) without him. His leaving

²⁸This is a pseudonym. The names of all parishioners have been changed.

occurred near Christmas of that year. The convergence of these two losses, along with memories of other parishioners leaving about that time, resulted in major trauma to the congregation.

At the time of Fr. Brady's retirement, a priest who was part of the worshipping community, Fr. Eden, lost his position as chaplain at nearby Ingalls Hospital. The church decided to call him as the interim priest. The relationship with the interim minister was stormy and lasted about a year. In the community discussion there was a realization that they probably should have called someone with more detachment to help guide them through their grief in the transitional period before calling a new rector. As it was, they instituted a search process and called Fr. Hayden to become rector partly to escape their problems with Fr. Eden and out of fear of having to become part of a parish cluster. But that relationship was also troubled from the start, some of it due to his difficulty relating to the Harvey neighborhood and church, some of it due to his assumption that the parish was "over" Fr. Brady's departure, and some due to financial stresses where the parish felt it needed to defer some of his health insurance and pension payments to meet "more pressing bills." His tenure only lasted from 1996 until Easter of 1999.²⁹

It is quite possible that the series of facilitated parish discussions that I led from September 1999 until May 2000, along with a "Healing Day" in the summer of 2000 led by another regular supply priest, were the only opportunities for parishioners to do major reflection and grief work together since the traumatic events of 1994. In our discussions, there began to emerge a reassertion of pride in their identity as a parish along with a greater willingness to accept responsibility for the choices of clergy they made in the time following Fr. Brady's departure. They were moving to a deeper understanding of why their relationships with these

²⁹Parish discussion notes of February 20, 2000 and February 27, 2000.

transitional clergy were so strained. It was from this context that the parish communal spiritual discernment project was born.

Setting Up the Project. While providing the consulting for the parish I discussed with a vestry member and the wardens my interest in working with the parish on the communal spiritual discernment project. Since there was interest on their part we set up a meeting with the vestry on February 4, 2001, to formally propose the training program and the project framework. At the vestry meeting I presented an overview of the program and the thesis project, which the vestry approved.

The first phase of the project plan provided a general formation program for all adults (with an expectation that the parish's leaders would attend) in the history and contemporary application of spiritual discernment for individuals and the community as a whole. I would also address the power of symbols in shaping consciousness and direction in our lives and in the communities we live in and the part symbols may play in spiritual discernment. This part of the program would explore the community's own history of decision-making and attempts at discernment of God's will.

The second phase of the project involved forming a communal discernment group that would meet regularly. The discernment group might be the vestry (and clergy if available), or it might be an advisory group to the formal decision-making body. This group might serve the parish in two capacities: as a "clearness committee" for individuals seeking clarity in personal discernment and as practitioners of communal discernment for community questions. In the latter capacity a system would be implemented to feed discernment group findings into the formal decision-making structure of the congregation if the group was an advisory group to the

vestry (and clergy). I would serve as facilitator/trainer of the group during this phase, providing twelve hours of advanced training and related help in building up the group.

The final phase of the project called for me to provide six hours as mentor to the discernment group and/or vestry. I would support the leadership's transition to a structure that incorporated communal spiritual discernment into its decision-making. Additionally, I would lead the parish in a closing celebration of their work together in completion of their program, provide an opportunity for parishioners to reflect on what they have learned, and give me critical feedback on the project.

I had two primary goals for this project:

1. Equip the participant church with trained members and leaders capable of applying spiritual discernment practices to individual and communal questions related to the faith community's ongoing life, mission, and ministry.
2. Assist the church community's leadership with designing, implementing, and maintaining a system of decision-making and visioning that integrates ongoing communal spiritual discernment disciplines into its processes.

One question raised at this meeting was whether the project would help them find a rector for the parish. A vestry member replied that since they may have to call several priests over time, and since other questions and problems come up for them to face, he would like to have a deeper understanding of spiritual discernment that would inform the decisions they need to make.

I was asked to give an example of what I meant by "symbol guidance." I suggested one of the very powerful symbols that emerged from our previous work together was "food."

Parishioners described their church community's racial and ethnic diversity as a "mixed garden salad" and that being fed and feeding others is very important to them. Eucharist, where a spiritual feeding is celebrated, is very important in the worship life of their church. They operate a very strong ministry to the local community by operating a food and clothing bank. Almost everyone helps out in some way in this effort. There is lots of energy around that ministry. Is this a desire that is planted in their hearts by God? If this is God's call what is needed to answer it? Are there next steps? Symbol guidance would help them to be aware of the powerful symbols that emerge within the life of the faith community and how they shape the direction of the parish.

We agreed to start up the project with five general formation sessions beginning late Epiphany and running throughout Lent. Each session would be held after Mass for one and a half hours with the final session held on Palm/Passion Sunday. Advanced training was targeted to begin on the second or third Sunday of Easter.

First General Session--What is Spiritual Discernment? This session gave the sixteen participants an initial understanding of the term "spiritual discernment." Through exercises, discussion, Bible study, and written material the class was introduced to general principles of spiritual discernment.

*"Listening for God" Exercise.*³⁰ Participants were led in meditative listening both to external and inner sounds. They were asked to consider what might God be trying to say if the sounds were signs of the presence of God or the "voices" of God? There were opportunities for sharing their findings both in pairs or triads and in the whole group.

³⁰Appendix 2 contains all session outlines, handouts, and survey information.

During the meditation the motor of one of the large refrigerators was running rather noisily. Phoebe, the director of the Food Pantry, heard the noise as an awareness of God's work in their mission of feeding people. Thomas, a vestry member who had worked for the Chicago Trade Authority, heard it as God saying they need to fix the refrigerator because it is running too much and costing too much. *This incident revealed a tension that exists in communities between people who easily engage in symbolic, non-linear thinking and those who are most comfortable with concrete, pragmatic thinking. A process of decision-making that incorporates spiritual discernment needs to integrate both of these ways of engaging reality.*

"Names of God" Exercise. I asked the class to brainstorm various metaphors for God while I put them on a blackboard. Then we looked at how the names tended to express either relational qualities about God's love (speaking of God's "desires" for us) or legal/volitional dimensions of understanding God (speaking of God's "will" for us). This was followed by class discussion on the kind of God we imagine and the relationship we seek in spiritual discernment.

From this session the class learned the following important points. First, the practice of spiritual discernment is grounded in Hebrew and Christian biblical experience. Second, listening for the signs of God's presence in both our inner and outer world is an essential characteristic of spiritual discernment. Third, the primary metaphor we have for God affects whether we want to seek God's guidance for our lives or try to avoid it. Fourth, discernment is not something divorced from the whole of our lives. Rather, our capability for spiritual discernment is developed by being spiritually disciplined and aware, connected to the faith community, and committed to active service and compassion in the world. Fifth, there are signs of God's call or

direction we can be alert to in discernment work. Sixth, there are obstacles that can impede our ability to discern God's direction.

Second General Session--Individual Spiritual Discernment. Before the class, the congregation heard my sermon that drew on the Desert Elders' discernment practice of following a thought to its source, and their teachings on the "eight deadly thoughts." The sermon context was Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. This session introduced the class to three Christian spiritual traditions that contribute to the practice of spiritual discernment and particularly support individual discernment: Desert Elders, Ignatian, and Carmelite.

From the Desert Elders tradition presentation three central points emerged. First, be critically aware of inner experience and thoughts and treat them with discernment. In the desert tradition's interest in the origin of thoughts, and in the tripartite model of the soul, there is a sacred psychology that helps us appreciate the power of the inner movements, impulses, and forces that affect us.³¹ Second, spiritual direction is a resource for assisting individual discernment. We do not need to do our work of discernment alone--there are people within the Christian community who are willing and able to assist us as companions on the sacred journey. Third, a personal spiritual rule provides an intentional foundation for living a discerning life.

Central teachings also came out of the Ignatian tradition. Our deepest desire is God's desire for us. If we are stuck with an understanding of God as essentially wrathful or that God's

³¹In class I presented the notion of the tripartite nature of the soul. Evagrius Ponticus gave the analogy of a charioteer, representing "reason," holding the reins of two powerful horses that are the bodily passions. One horse represented the "anger" energies that react to that with which the person does not want or identify. The other horse represented the "desire" energies that react to that with which the person does identify or wants. As long as the charioteer held the reins of the horses the chariot would go where the charioteer intended. If the reins were dropped, one or the other horse would be out of control with harmful consequences. See Roberta Bondi, "Anger: Help from the Desert," *Weavings* 9 (March/April 1994) : 6-14.

will for us must be somehow distasteful this point will be impossible to understand. The role of spiritual discernment is to get us to the place where we truly recognize our deepest desire.

Another Ignatian teaching had to do with “holy indifference.” Praying for holy indifference can bring us to a spiritual state which frees us to seek God’s direction rather than our little inclinations and preferences. Holy indifference doesn’t necessarily take away our preferences, it gives us the freedom to explore other possibilities and to seek God, and God’s direction for us, above all else. People also learned that imagination is a powerful tool that can be used in the service of discernment. The Ignatian exercises include a number of opportunities to visualize ourselves in scenes from scripture and other situations. Ignatian meditations are a precedent in the Christian spiritual tradition for symbol guidance. Finally, a discernor should pay attention to the affective dimension of their life when engaging questions of discernment. The “Rules for the Discernment of Spirits” in the *Spiritual Exercises* can be helpful guides to discernment work. In those Rules are guidelines on spiritual consolation and desolation that can help discern movements toward or away from God.

Carmelite tradition offered several principles for discernment. Prayer and loving attentiveness to God are foundational to discernment. But a person can experience different stages in their prayer life, ranging from very active to receptive states of prayer. Another principle is that the discernment of truth can require us to let go of outcomes, trusting in God. John of the Cross speaks of “dark nights” of the spirit and soul which strip away our attachments to things and even our understanding of God and self. Finally, sometimes we cannot trust our perceptions and a helpful test of discernment is whether or not there are signs of the fruit of the Spirit.

Third General Session--Communal Spiritual Discernment. The sermon was linked with the general topic of communal spiritual discernment. Drawing from the lesson about Moses and the burning bush, I led the congregation in a guided-imagery meditation on encountering God in the burning bush and being called to mission as a church. Benedictine spirituality was the tradition used to introduce communal spiritual discernment. The Benedictine practice of living under an ordered rule in community in order to establish “a school for the Lord’s service” raised the question of St. Clement’s sense of purpose. The Benedictine values of humility, balance, simplicity, moderation, community, work and prayer, and lives shaped by *lectio divina* were emphasized in the presentation. Benedictine vows of stability, obedience, and ongoing conversion form the core of a spirituality lived to the glory of God through the monastic community. Chapter 3 of the *Rule* and Chittister’s commentary formed the basis of discussion of the dynamics of Benedictine decision-making.

This session was marked by increased sharing of stories by parishioners about their own discernment issues and struggles in spiritual disciplines. They were making strong personal connections now with the general subject of discernment. Bridget led discussion about how not everything requires discernment. Many things just need to be done with common sense and in honor of commitments. Deborah, preparing to retire, spoke about teaching and vocational call—and after another parishioner suggested it, realized she probably has touched some teenagers’ lives in important ways that she is not always aware of. Irene spoke of her struggles with keeping to daily devotional reading along with reading the scriptures for the day. Miriam, the organist-choir director, shared a great story of her anger at a fellow employee and how a co-worker gently but very firmly intervened in a way that brought her to reconciliation. We had a

great time making connections between her story and the Desert Elders' "anger horse" running out of control and the use of a spiritual elder/guide to restore wholeness.

After I presented on *lectio divina* movements I invited people to reflect on what occurred for them during the sermon's meditation. Hilda found herself asking God about the physical maintenance needs of the church. A psalm came to her where she challenged God not to put them to shame about the church. Mark had a strong sense of the need to serve others outside the church and in the neighborhood, while also being appreciative of the sense of community within the church. Irene said that she was caught by the Lukan parable of the unfruitful fig tree, in which the steward asks to give it another year, doing more digging around it and giving it more fertilizer. She saw that as a parable for the church's situation. Bridget was struck by our wonderful boldness, like Moses, at approaching the burning bush and engaging God.

This session marked a shift in the dynamics of the project. People were now clearly personally engaged and energized by the subject of spiritual discernment. The general formation program was providing them with a *safe and informed environment* for exploring their personal and community issues and sharing with each other their questions and discoveries. Participants identified parallels between Benedictine community values and those of their own faith community. Reflection on *lectio divina* and the guided-imagery meditation clearly illustrated the power of symbols to give rise to thoughts about the community and mission.

Fourth General Session--Continuation of Communal Discernment and Power of Symbols. With all the discussion at the last session I needed to get caught up on other communal discernment traditions. This presentation included: the important Deliberations of 1539 in the founding of the Society of Jesus; Anglican contributions to discernment in the tripartite sources

of authority, *via media* comprehensiveness, and an appreciation for the power of symbols and rites, and the "sacramental principle." Brief mention was made of Wesleyan covenant groups. The Quaker "clearness committee" process of discernment was described. The class also received a handout on basic tenets of group discernment.

Following this whirlwind presentation we focused on the power of symbols to guide us. The sermon I gave on the parable of the prodigal son introduced the whole congregation to the subject of multiple levels of meaning with symbols and symbol networks. A dreamwork handout on multiple levels of possible meaning in interpretation of dreams provided a conceptual frame for understanding that symbols can address many levels of experience ranging from the personal, to communal, to archetypal, to global. I introduced them to the concept of primary Christian symbols and root metaphors. We also discussed Victor Turner's anthropological work on ritual events, making applications to our own liturgical rites and their power to shape our lives. At the end of the session we went to the nave of the church and parishioners pointed out symbols of particular interest or meaning for them.

Fifth General Session--Building a Discerning Church. Most of our time was spent going over the "Spiritual Discernment Cycle" chart and giving personal examples of its application. There was discussion about ways that the community could enter into deeper spiritual discernment: by aiding the individual's discernment as spiritual friends, or as a more formal clearness committee/listening hearts group; and in discernment of community questions. I also went over the plans for the next stage of training, inviting the class members to consider joining the advanced training. A survey was distributed at this session. I eventually got four surveys returned. The responses showed quite a bit of candor and vulnerability in reflecting on

personal discernment. The respondents were able to identify some informal practices the parish community engages in that may add a discernment dimension to some of their decision-making.³²

Preparing for Advanced Training and a Discernment Group. The next vestry meeting established who was eligible to attend the advanced training and structural implications for a parish discernment group's involvement in formal decision-making. The vestry agreed with my recommendation that attendance in at least three of the five general sessions should be a minimum requirement for eligibility to take the advanced training. From those on the vestry who were eligible, two vestry members and the two wardens wanted to take the advanced training along with any parishioners who were interested and met the three-session minimum. A parish discernment group would be initially formed out of those who took the advanced training and structured to serve as an advisory resource to the vestry.

The four vestry/warden members of the advanced training group met with me to establish advanced training dates and potential members of a parish discernment group. *The four of them agreed that the major parish issue charged by the vestry for discernment work revolved around the questions: What structure of relationship to other area churches best supports St. Clement's sense of mission and ministry? What considerations emerge from this for calling a priest to serve the parish?* Subsequent recruitment resulted in adding two parishioners, Mark and Irene, along with previously committed wardens, Deborah and Bridget, and vestry members, Miriam and Hilda.

³²Survey results are included in Appendix 2.

First Advanced Session. The first advanced training session was scheduled for two hours. We began with a simple centering silence and then moved into a check-in period, inviting sharing on either personal or parish developments.

Discernment Exercise: Prayerfulness. The group was then led in a “prayerfulness exercise” that I learned from Gerald May at a Spiritual Directors International conference. I invited them into silence asking them to move into prayer and notice what it feels like to be in prayer, and also to be aware of what they do as they are praying. After a few minutes I asked them to open their eyes (if they had closed them), but try to retain their sense of being in prayer while continuing to be aware of what they were feeling and what was occurring for them as they were praying. Finally, I asked them to share with the other members what this exercise was like for them, saying a little about what they were experiencing, and listening carefully to each other, but also remaining in a state of prayer while the sharing was occurring. *The challenge is to learn to be prayerful, that is, conscious of divine Presence (“spiritually recollected” in the traditional language of mystical theology) and at the same time aware of inner and external experience while in group settings as a way of inviting a deeper sense of discernment.*

Exercise on Spiritual Paths. The group then filled out a spirituality inventory from Corinne Ware’s book, *Discover Your Spiritual Type*, and went over my own version of the spirituality wheel to get a sense of different spiritual paths on individual and church levels. People in the group thought it would be a good exercise for presentation to the church sometime to develop an appreciation for different spiritual paths and ways of praying. *This exercise opened the group to understand that prayer is multifaceted and different paths can make a contribution to the whole.*

Parish Discernment Work. The group was in agreement that the primary discernment issue with the parish centered around whether to collaborate in some way with another parish, or parishes, and what is needed in a parish priest serving St. Clement's Church. They identified the parish as being in the stages of forming the question and gathering data on the "spiritual discernment cycle." At the end of the session I asked participants to share what they felt might be God's invitation to them out of what was said and done in the group. We closed by forming a circle of prayer and inviting members to offer their prayers for the group, the church, and their own intentions. *This became the basic model of the advanced training program:* centering and check-in; discernment exercise(s); application to discernment situations; closing prayer circle. Between sessions, group members were asked to keep a journal with entries about the images, phrases, questions, and sense of direction emerging from their prayer, meditation, and life events.

Second Advanced Session. This four-hour session was held a month later. We met at a member's apartment on the shore of Lake Michigan on a warm, sunny day. A meditation chime called the group to five minutes of silent centering prayer. At the check-in there was sharing around personal challenges that some of the group members were facing. Deborah was also concerned about the pastoral needs of St. Clement's in the aftermath of a parishioner's discovery of a brain tumor and the death of a parishioner's brother-in-law. She was clearly anxious about getting a rector and feeling the weight of being senior warden.

That concern led to discussion on the need for greater connection with the diocesan congregational development officer and gathering information about St. Ambrose Church and other neighboring churches. Hilda felt that the other Episcopal parishes in the region have some

significant issues they need to sort out before St. Clement's Church would be interested in joining them in a shared ministry arrangement.

Discernment Exercise: Group Lectio Divina. As one of the discernment exercises for the day I introduced a form of group *lectio divina* that is frequently called the "African Bible Study" method.³³ In that process the same scripture passage is read three times, each reading followed by a period of silence and then the people's response to some rendition of the following questions in turn: 1) what word or phrase caught my attention? 2) how does this passage speak to a situation in my life or the life of my community? 3) from everything that I have heard, what is God inviting me (or my community) to be or do in the coming days? I used the gospel for the following Sunday, which was Luke 7:36-50 (at a meal at a Pharisee's house a woman who is a sinner anoints Jesus' feet with a flask of ointment and her tears, and wipes his feet with her hair).

This exercise brought the group to consider the parish's relationship and attitudes toward the clients they serve through the Food Bank, recognizing that the clients are no different from parishioners except for the circumstances in their lives. It also brought them to look at the "Pharisee" and the "repentant woman" aspects of themselves, and the positive and negative qualities of each side. But it also brought out some of the deep desires of two members who want to know God's call for themselves and their struggle with not knowing, lack of clarity.

I had planned on leading them in another exercise that I developed from Walter Wink's suggestions of discerning the spirit/angel of a church or organization. Due to time constraints I gave them the handout and discussed with them how they could either do this as a journaling exercise or as an active imagination exercise. Several members thought it would be a good

³³See "A Simple Group Form of *Lectio Divina* (Holy Reading) in Appendix 2.

exercise for interested parishioners to be led through. We left it that members would try it out sometime by themselves.

The St. Clement's Dream. We were reporting in on what had emerged from journaling or prayer over the past few weeks related to discernment issues for St. Clement's when Miriam mentioned that she had been having a recurrent dream. She said she didn't know why she kept having it but it definitely related to St. Clement's. I suggested that since we were working together on spiritual discernment for the parish, "maybe it is not only for you, but it is for us."

So she told us this dream —

This is the only dream that I have had that has to do with St. Clement's and I've been having it for about five years now. It is my wedding day. St. Clement's is beautifully decorated. My limo pulls up. I'm an observer, so I'm watching myself. And I step out with my bridesmaids. When I first started having my dream we all wore black. We processed into the church where I see all the guests dressed in black. Father Brady is at the front, and while he looks sad all the guests, who are also dressed in black, look happy. Some of them are crying but they have smiles on their faces. My father leads me up to the altar where I notice something black. It is a casket. The groom is standing next to the casket. He opens it and places a white rose inside. When he opens it I catch a glimpse of the man inside. It is a former parishioner. I start to cry. The groom and I take hands and Father Brady begins the ceremony in front of the casket.

Miriam continued her narrative:

I've been having this dream for five years now. Each time the dream is almost the same with slight variations. My dress and my bridesmaids dresses are getting lighter each time I have the dream. The last time I had the dream everyone was wearing a kind of peach, which is one of my favorite colors. Usually, now when I have the dream, when I march into the church the casket is almost always open.

In the course of working with the dream on that communal level it became apparent to the group that the dream was a profound guide to the spiritual and emotional needs and health of the church. The death of Peter (the man in the casket) and the fairly sudden retirement for health reasons of their rector of thirty years, Fr. Brady, resulted in major trauma for the parish. The

badly needed grief work on a community-wide level did not happen either through the leadership of their interim priest or the rector that followed. Most of the processing of these losses had to happen on an individual basis, delaying communal healing. The parish has gone through much of its healing now (the casket is open, the dream recurs less frequently, and the color has shifted to peach) but recovery may not be complete. Funeral and wedding symbols were still side by side.

There was strong interest in sharing the dream with the parish, but Miriam was concerned about Phoebe, Peter's widow, afraid that it would reopen her pain and hurt her feelings. We were not sure what to do, and so we chose to wait for further clarity.³⁴

Third Advanced Session. This three-hour session occurred three weeks later. Some diocesan staff wanted to set up a meeting with the parish to discuss clergy deployment considerations in early September. Bridget suggested that the vestry could come up with a list of options around calling a priest and parish connections with regional churches in advance of that meeting. An important question was raised by Mark about whether parishioners would be consulted by the vestry prior to the vestry's prioritizing options. This is a key issue in communal spiritual discernment. *To what degree are people that are affected by the decisions that a church community makes given the opportunity to provide their perspective and be consulted prior to the decision?* The two wardens and Hilda (a vestry member) held that in a church this small everyone's perspective can be considered either by direct contact or by knowledge vestry members have gained by remembering previous conversations. St. Clement's, they observed, has not had a history of having people go onto vestry due to particular power agenda issues. Some of

³⁴Full notes related to this dreamwork session are in Appendix 2.

Mark's concern was shaped by having a Baptist orientation and still trying to understand Episcopal Church polity. Nevertheless that very "outside" perspective was helpful in holding the importance of this issue before the group.

Discernment Exercise: Clearness Committee. The discernment exercise for this session was introducing the group to a "clearness committee" type of discernment process. The group was to sit with a person who was seeking God's direction in a life situation. The idea of the "clearness committee" or a "Listening Hearts discernment group" is for the group to ask the kinds of questions that assist the focus person in discovering her or his own deepest inner truth and God's inner direction related to the question for discernment. In this case Hilda had volunteered to present a situation to the group. She prepared a statement in advance of the meeting that described her situation and distributed it to the group members before the meeting. Then in the meeting we sat with her for about ninety minutes asking questions that helped her explore her work situation.

In a process review following the exercise they realized they had stayed primarily in a "counseling mode" rather than a spiritual discernment mode—not asking questions like "How do you think God might have you deal with this person?" or "How do you pray for him?" Hilda realized that she didn't address any of those kinds of issues in her written presentation in advance of the meeting. The group recognized they had covered the more familiar territory on the map but a second session or a more extended time might lead them into the less familiar territory of discernment questions.

Fourth Advanced Session. The final three-hour session was held six weeks later.

Discernment Exercises: Guided Scripture Meditation and Contemplative Prayer with a Question. The first communal discernment exercise was a guided-imagery meditation based on a post-Easter resurrection appearance of Jesus to the disciples patterned from John 20:19-22 and Luke 24:36b-40,44-49. This was the meditation I described at the beginning of this study. The second discernment exercise, contemplatively sitting with a question, flowed from the debriefing following the first exercise. I referred to that exercise, too. The instruction was for the group to draw a question from their meditation experience or simply to hold their seeking God's direction and mission for the parish in the silence before the divine Presence and be open to whatever occurred. I used a Tibetan singing bowl to usher in the fifteen minutes of sustained silence. Using the singing bowl again marked the end of the silence and return to ordinary consciousness. They then reported what they received from the prayer. Among the statements of appreciation and concern for the church was a phrase that emerged from the prayer: "Feed my sheep." This phrase was the seed God planted in the group consciousness for a parish mission statement.

Transition from Training to Application. The members of the group turned their attention to their role in parish life now that they had completed the advanced training. They reaffirmed their role in providing discernment assistance in the broader decision-making of the parish. They would offer interpersonal companionship in discernment of individual issues. The group also wanted to bring discernment exercises and teaching to the parish as formation offerings. Irene raised the question of possible involvement beyond the parish, noting that the deanery might form a discernment group. We then looked at some of the ways they would like to use my services for the final six hours of mentoring, including being present when the Rev.

Sheila Ferguson came to St. Clement's and sitting in on a vestry meeting and/or a gathering of the discernment advisory group.

A New Kind of Vestry Meeting. The vestry meeting of August 25, 2001 was the first time that the discernment group members helped shape the meeting and brought their training to bear on its structure and agenda. Apparently the members felt that the meeting went very well according to an e-mail note I received from Hilda in which she identified a number of ways that she saw their training had an impact on the meeting.³⁵ The wardens provided information on possible clergy configurations to people a week in advance. An agenda was distributed. Financial reports were distributed at the *end* of the meeting rather than at the beginning. Both non-vestry members of the discernment group were present and at Irene's suggestion the meeting began with a few minutes of silent prayer. A letter to the parish for discussion about possible clergy configurations and the listing of priorities were arrived at by consensus.³⁶ Hilda remarked that at one point the meeting was getting sidetracked and she asked people to return to the important things the vestry has to discuss. She wrote that she probably would not have done that before taking the discernment training.

October Meetings with Diocesan Officials. In October 2001 parish leaders had several conversations with diocesan officials about St. Clement's ministry development and calling of a rector. Sheila Ferguson came for a visit with the parish on October 16 and Tim Hall sat with the vestry on the October 23. The parish community was challenged to not expect financial dependence on the diocese, to become a church committed to growth as part of its mission in the

³⁵This correspondence is included in Appendix 1.

³⁶Included in Appendix 1.

world, and also to recognize its strengths. Both diocesan representatives expressed caution about merging or sharing deeply with weaker churches. *The vestry letter that had been developed with the leadership of the parish discernment advisory group provided a framework for discussion with both Ferguson and Hall.*

Parish Presentation: Window for Group Self-Awareness. Also in October, by the invitation of the discernment group, I gave a presentation for vestry and interested parishioners on “A Window for Group Self-Awareness” using a Johari’s window format³⁷. The presentation generated discussion about the gifts of St. Clement’s Church, issues of openness and invitations to the public, and initiatory stages for new members.

Parish Base-Community Bible Study (African Bible Study/ Group Lectio Divina).

Mark initiated a Bible study group in the fall. At first it was held on a weekday, later Bible study was held on some Sundays following coffee hour. The discernment group asked me to introduce the parish to the group *lectio divina* format, and I did so on November 11. The parishioners broke into four small table groups of four to five people each with table group facilitators who were either members of the discernment advisory group that had experienced this model (Hilda and Bridget) or who had been part of the general discernment formation program. We used 2 Thess. 2:13-3:5 as the reading—one of the readings from the Sunday propers.

Following small group *lectio divina* I asked about their experience of this method (which was strongly positive) and whether there were things that emerged from the table groups that might be God’s invitation for the parish. *What came out from two of the table groups was a sense of deepening the call to outreach and evangelism. One group said that in this second*

³⁷See Appendix 2.

month after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon the members of St. Clement's have a strong supportive community that many people do not have. The call seemed to be to reach out to those who do not have this kind of support and invite them in.

First Discernment Advisory Group Meeting. The first group meeting following the end of training was held on November 25, 2001. The meeting was essentially an opportunity to reflect on their own group process. Several members thought it was beneficial for a discernment group to help the congregation stay focused on issues and provide good facilitation. Bridget, the junior warden, thought that the parish was impressed by the group *lectio divina* format for Bible study. In the small groups it was a real learning for people to just receive statements without others making comments. Something like that, she ventured, could be adapted to a vestry meeting where you read the question and go around listening to each person without commentary and then read the question again and go around for another hearing of people. They set up another meeting for January 6 and asked me to be with them as coach and provide them with a sample meeting format that they could refer to in thinking about running their meetings.

The Dream Theme Re-emerges. In the week before the closure ceremony some email correspondence occurred between Bridget and Miriam about her recurring dream. Miriam sent me a copy of her reply to Bridget and asked me for my own thoughts on possible meaning. She had not had the dream for several months but when she was in Texas for a wedding, while heading to the reception, she reported, "...I SAW THE LIMO from my dream--it was Champagne. As soon as I saw it I knew it was the same color. I don't know if that has some significance or not. It was definitely the same color and same length."

My reply to her suggested possible communal associations:

What strikes me this time is how life seems to conspire to get you (and now us) to pay attention to the limo--and its champagne color. Not only a light golden color, but also a drink that I think of as very festive, rich, bubbly, and can lessen inhibitions and bring us to celebrate the joy of life. A limousine is a pretty elegant way to travel, as befits a bride and her party. Between the "peach" color of the gathered community, and the champagne color of the limo, it might suggest that St. Clement's is moving into a very "fruitful," joyful, less inhibited time in its life. I would love that as a dream for this community. I wonder what others would get from this about St. Clement's?

Parish Closure Celebration of the Discernment Project. On December 16, 2001, we celebrated the completion of the program in communal spiritual discernment at St. Clement's Church. Hilda, who has been the parish scribe for many of the events that I was involved in, took notes. In the course of the celebration we acknowledged the many people that took part in various aspects of the discernment program. I gave particular attention to those who did the advanced training, and how they now constitute a resource to the parish as the Parish Discernment Advisory Group. I presented the church with a gift, a singing bowl, and used it to lead everyone into a guided meditation on visualizing Christ in our midst and reflecting with Christ on the discernment program.

Following the meditation I led the parish in a review and evaluation of the discernment training program. The questions I asked related to how the program has impacted the community; what might be next steps that God is inviting individuals and the church to take and whether there are any particular symbols, images or words connected to that invitation; and what recommendations they have for me in developing this work with other churches. I also printed out the questions for anyone to give written responses; two parishioners who were present at the closure ceremony also turned in written replies to the questions a few weeks later.

One additional event of importance occurred during the closure celebration. During the reflection and feedback time Miriam mentioned that one of the things she found particularly

valuable was the work that was shared in the group regarding the recurrent dream she has had about the church. Then when people wanted more information she told the dream and talked about the changes that had occurred over time. It generated a great amount of excitement in the gathering, with people closely relating to the shifts in the symbols as expressions of the challenges in grief work and movement toward recovered health the parish is making.

A Church with a Discerned Mission. On January 6, 2002, I sat in on the new Parish Discernment Advisory Group meeting, giving them a suggested format for future meetings as they requested. The group decided that they were ready to help lead the parish! For immediate action they were going to make contact with the diocesan clergy deployment officer and get things started for a clergy search. In two weeks they were going to meet again and develop a process for generating a parish mission statement, with a draft statement going for a hearing with the congregation on January 20 and ratification at the annual parish meeting on January 27. Also, the group decided to recommend to the vestry that the parish resume term limits, rotating off those who had served longest and electing new members. Several years ago the parish received a recommendation from a diocesan officer to retain the same vestry while they were trying to stabilize and do preliminary parish work prior to a search for a rector. The group now recommended returning to a normal process of terms for vestry.

The group met two weeks later and drafted a parish mission statement and statement of values. That statement went to the hearing with the congregation where a few minor changes were made, and it was ratified at the parish meeting the next week. The parish mission statement

reads: *St. Clement's Church strives to fulfill the command of our Lord Jesus Christ to "Feed My Sheep" – in body, mind, and spirit.*³⁸

The vestry agreed with the advisory group's recommendation to resume the normal processes of electing new vestry members, and that too was instituted at the parish meeting. Also, early in 2002 initial contact was made with the diocesan clergy deployment officer, signaling the parish's formal interest in starting up the process of searching for a rector. St. Clement's Church was living into a discerned direction.

³⁸The full text of the parish statement of mission and values is included in Appendix 1.

CHAPTER 4

REFLECTION ON THE PROJECT: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE BROADER CHURCH

Project Goals. One goal I identified at the outset of this project was *to equip the participant church with trained members and leaders capable of applying spiritual discernment practices to individual and communal questions related to the faith community's ongoing life, mission, and ministry.* I accomplished this by providing several levels of training to the parish, giving participants both an understanding of the rich history of spiritual discernment in the life of the Church and opportunities to practice spiritual exercises that might help them do the work of discernment. The five-session parish-wide formation program focused more on the history and theory of discernment. It set the foundation for the practice. I had supplemented this general program with several sermons (and a guided meditation at sermon time) that connected with major topics related to spiritual discernment. So, whether the parishioners took the general formation or not, virtually every adult and older youth that was attending church during this general formation period got some exposure to the notion of spiritual discernment.

There were some limitations at the general formation level that are worthy of mention. One was that I always felt rushed, even though these were ninety-minute sessions. There was always a tension between giving adequate time for the didactic presentations of foundational material and providing time for discussion. In future work with parishes I think I would cut back

on some of the historical information and further open up discussion opportunities. Another consideration is that in discussion much of it was as a whole group of between ten and sixteen participants. Small table discussion with a brief report-in from the table groups, or using dyads and triads for sharing, or the practice of “mutual invitation” where a speaker concludes his or her own statement with an invitation to another person to speak, would have brought out more voices, especially in a multi-cultural milieu where some people are conditioned to speak less or not at all unless invited to speak. We did use some table group discussion, and once used dyads/triads, and I introduced the community to the practice of mutual invitation during some of the earlier consulting work prior to this training, but I think it would be an improvement on the training to do more of this approach to discussion.

Both the general and the advanced training addressed the individual and the communal dimensions of spiritual discernment. The training grounded the individual dimension of discernment in the context of the community of faith. *Therefore participants learned the essentially communal nature of the work of spiritual discernment.*

In the advanced training, the group consisted of six participants which greatly increased the chances for discussion. The format called for a lengthy check-in time and reflection time following the experientially-oriented discernment exercises. Having the four sessions spaced over the summer further deepened the training in the work of discernment because the intervals between sessions provided events that could be brought into the ongoing discernment work, and it modeled an important dimension of discernment in establishing a slower, more reflective and contemplative pace. This advanced formation program and the six-hour mentoring follow-up provided depth experience and reflection opportunities for the advanced group members.

I wanted to give all the participants opportunities to recognize that God often speaks in the language of symbols and offers direction through our conscious engagement of those emergent symbols in the concrete context of our lives as individuals and as a faith community. This guiding power of symbols was profoundly expressed and understood in the advanced training group's engagement of Miriam's dream – which became the parish's dream of loss acceptance and healing in the closing celebration. I deeply believe that the recurring dream in its development over time was not only Miriam's dream, and the parish's dream, but also most deeply God's dream for the healing and joyful unity of this church.

Symbol guidance also was powerfully expressed in the food imagery that kept occurring in the life of the parish. The Food Pantry is the defining social ministry of the parish to the broader community of Harvey and the region. Nearly everyone in the church makes a contribution to the operation of this ministry – from grant writing to distribution. Eucharist is the central weekly liturgical celebration with its powerful sacramental feeding of Christ's people of St. Clement's Church with his Body and Blood. This feeding theme made its way, very appropriately, to become the central guiding symbol for the community through the Parish Discernment Advisory Committee's work on the parish mission statement's "Feed My Sheep" motif.

The comments of participants at the end of the program certainly support the claim that the goal of equipping the church with trained members and leaders capable of providing spiritual discernment leadership to the parish and its members had been accomplished. This was further emphasized in the way the newly-established Parish Discernment Advisory Group has taken on

tasks in leading the parish into its discernment work and their willingness to assist individual parishioners in personal discernment issues.

The second goal of the project was *to assist the church community's leadership with designing, implementing, and maintaining a system of decision-making and visioning that integrates ongoing communal spiritual discernment disciplines into its processes.* This was accomplished, but with much less formal structuring than I originally anticipated. The less formal structure serves this small church better than a more clearly articulated committee structure – because St. Clement's Church, like many small churches, has a broad communication network with informal discussion of issues with parishioners. I also discovered the effectiveness of having members of the parish discernment group come from both the general parish membership and from the formal decision-making body (the vestry and wardens). The general members gave a perspective that was detached from the governing-board culture. The vestry members and wardens brought the perspective of knowing issues in the church's life that needed the prudence of a discernment process.

The Parish Discernment Advisory Group did take leadership in moving the parish along in the process of looking at alternatives related to calling a priest to serve the parish. This was a task that was given to the advisory group by the vestry. The group also made an important recommendation to the vestry on returning to a normal process of vestry elections. Underneath that recommendation was a clear sense that the parish had done enough healing work to “move on.” The advisory group served the whole parish in leading it into reflection on their deepest sense of calling. They helped discover that central to the parish's special sense of purpose for being in the Harvey area and serving that broader community is the symbol of Christ asking St.

Clement's to "Feed My Sheep" in a way that is wholistic – honoring corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions of that feeding.

The Parish Discernment Advisory Group may continue, as the members say it will, to meet on a regular basis. However, it may also happen that the group will shift to meeting on an *ad hoc* basis or disband as a formal group and operate in an informal manner. Whatever shape the group will take in the future, God will continue to use these people and their sensitivity to the communal dimensions of spiritual discernment in the issues that emerge in this community's future.

Questions for Next Steps. This was a limited study and from it important questions emerge about communal spiritual discernment and symbol guidance. If the study were longer-term these are among the questions that would be investigated: How will St. Clement's Church use the Parish Discernment Advisory Group as a resource in its future? Will a mentor from the outside be called upon to further the group's and church's development as a discerning community? Will the way the vestry conducts its business be reshaped over time by this project and the discernment advisory group? When a rector is called to serve St. Clement's Church how will parish decision-making and discernment get reconfigured?

Conducting similar projects in other churches would give insight into other questions: What cultural and theological assumptions operative in a church make it easier or more difficult to introduce practices of symbol guidance and communal spiritual discernment? How does clergy involvement affect the development, structure, authority, and application of the discernment group? How does church size impact the way communal spiritual discernment

occurs? What adjustments in the project design would be required to apply this approach to communal discernment across denominational lines?

Deepening the capacity for communal spiritual discernment is not just a challenge to individual churches. What adjustments are needed to bring this project design to deanery and diocesan decision-making structures or to organizational steering committees?

Particular Contributions of this Study. This study advanced certain aspects of communal spiritual discernment beyond previous studies.

The spiritual discernment cycle is a useful map for understanding the process of communal and individual spiritual discernment. One of the benefits of the cyclic representation of discernment is that it emphasizes the ongoing character of the process of discernment. Another benefit of this representation of the process is that it gives a central place to the awareness of the guiding power of primary symbols that emerge from the community's spiritual discernment exercises such as engaging in various ways of prayer, using imaginative meditation with scripture, and practicing group dreamwork. A third helpful quality of the spiritual discernment cycle is that it provides a common orientation and understanding of the process and helps people identify when and how they can best contribute to the whole process. People like Thomas in the study, who are oriented to corporate business methods of decision-making and tend to see responsible fiscal management of the church as their primary concern, need reassurances that there is a time for gathering hard data and weighing alternatives with the community's best reasoned understandings and a time for evaluating the results of the

discernment work. The graphic conceptual approach of the spiritual discernment cycle helps them realize that the process will honor their questions and contributions.³⁹

Primary symbols have the capacity to provide guidance in the process of communal spiritual discernment. Symbols emerge from the life of the congregation that are both particular to the church's circumstances and also point to major themes in the common Christian tradition. Many tools frequently employed in the arts of spiritual direction and spiritual formation are helpful in discovering the primary symbols of the community. Shared silent prayer, active imagination and journaling exercises, guided imagery, group *lectio divina*, group dreamwork, and a host of other spiritual exercises were brought to the parish to equip the people with the ability to move into a receptive mode of consciousness and become aware of the symbol realm of their collective experience.

Primary symbols emerge from the collective depths of the community and are charged with the numinous power of the dream of God for the community. This is a relatively new understanding in the life of the church – except for an appreciation in Anglo-Catholic, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox liturgical traditions of the power of the sacraments. John Sanford and Morton Kelsey were major ground-breakers in the 1970's, associating Jungian depth psychology with Christian theology and applying this approach to practices of meditation and dreamwork.⁴⁰ However their work was primarily focused on the possibility of an individual's personal

³⁹I have also drawn on Todd Epstein's and Robert Dilts' three roles of "dreamer, realist, and critic" in the creative process to help people discover the way the role they tend to play can help the processes of spiritual discernment, creative decision-making, and implementation of the results (*Tools for Dreamers*, META Publications, 1991). We discussed how those roles can block creativity if they are not attuned to the over-arching purpose of spiritual discernment or are emphasized when it is not time to do so.

⁴⁰John Sanford's *Dreams: God's Forgotten Language* was first published in German in 1966, and in English in 1968. Morton Kelsey's *God, Dreams, and Revelation* first appeared in 1968 as *Dreams: The Dark Speech of the Spirit*.

encounter with God, as well as other levels of meaning, derived through the power of symbols from dream and meditation experiences.

The capability of following the guidance of God through these primary symbols requires the community to relinquish their sense of absolute control and enter the divine mystery in trust. Christian liturgical rituals help us face the power of sickness and death, bless couples in the unity of marriage, make us into the Church, provide forgiveness and reconciliation, nurture us in communion, and create other passageways to new positions and life. These rites call for entrusting our situation in life to the God beyond ourselves. In doing so our life is transformed. So, too, in spiritual discernment work and in following the guidance of primary symbols there is a “letting go” beyond our realm of control to encounter the realm of God. This capability gets developed through spiritual practices such as contemplative prayer, guided imagery meditations with scripture, and *lectio divina*.

These primary symbols may be understood as the instrumental language of God’s guidance of the church and, when attended to by the leadership structure, have the power to effect changes in the church’s corporate life, ministry, and sense of mission. A word of caution, however, is appropriate. Not all emergent symbols are necessarily from God. Not every dream symbol carries with it divine desire. Not every thought or picture that emerges while meditating on scripture is divinely inspired. It may seem self-evident but it deserves emphasis. Many forces can emerge in symbolic form, including symbols of evil. So it is necessary to look critically at the symbols, understanding that they can carry multiple levels of meaning, ranging from the

personal to the global, and explore their potential meanings.⁴¹ Some symbols will be primary symbols speaking to the faith community. Following the guidance of the primary symbols liberates creativity and opens up some possible directions for action even as it closes down other possible directions. The possibilities that are considered still need to be checked against the concrete circumstances of the parish, looking for the direction that provides the community with its most authentic development in the service of God.

Development of the community's ability to engage in spiritual discernment frees the church's leaders to engage the deepest issues at its spiritual core and moves the governing board beyond a focus on maintenance and management to vital directions of policy, ministry development, mission, and vision. A spiritual awakening occurs when the congregation is exposed to the Christian traditions of spiritual discernment. It is like treasure that has been buried that is newly found. When people learn of God's interest in the life of the community and God's desire to provide direction for the church there is a new appreciation for the gifts that the church has and a kindling of desire to share those gifts. There also is an increased sensitivity to the spiritual and pastoral health of the parish. Deepest yet, in the desire to know God's desire for the church, the leaders are challenged to shift the focus of their time and energy from issues of institutional maintenance to vital policy matters for ministry, growth, and fidelity to the church's perceived sense of mission.

In some situations it is helpful to have an advisory group, composed of members of the governing board and of the general congregation, assist the official decision-making body in the

⁴¹In my introduction to the Spiritual Discernment Cycle (p. 27) I suggested some possible discernment questions for determining whether the symbol is a primary symbol for the community.

work of spiritual discernment. One of the contributions of this project is to provide a flexible structure for the work of communal spiritual discernment. Through a set of choices made by the vestry and the group that was given advanced training in supporting both individual and communal discernment, an agreement was made that the discernment group would serve as an advisory body to the vestry and the parish – providing leadership in community issues calling for spiritual discernment as well as being a resource to individual people for discernment needs.

Transformed Governance. Is this project part of a greater movement of God calling church leaders to reappropriate the spiritual resources of discernment in the governing of their congregations and judicatory bodies? It does appear that the Episcopal Church would be well positioned to hear that call if it is from God. Since the Anglican notion of authority esteems the interplay of scripture, reason, and our spiritual tradition in the governance of the church, the call to the divine dance of discernment should be especially compelling for our churches.

There are barriers to hearing and answering such a call. There is a strong tendency to reduce discernment only to matters of vocational direction, and further reduce that to whether a person is or is not called to ordained ministry. What about developing supportive communal discernment processes that help people explore their evolving senses of ministry—whatever form that may take—and help them recognize encounters with God in the various dimensions of their lives?

Other barriers include a “traditional” limiting of vestry or bishop’s committee spheres to the temporal matters of the church and the failure of church governing boards to focus on deeper questions of mission and ministry development. These are reflected in the church canons emphasizing vestry management of property and finances and the rector’s authority over the

spiritual welfare of the church.⁴² The old dualism of lay people being responsible for the physical needs and clergy being responsible for the spiritual needs of the church is, thankfully, being challenged by the articulation of a baptismal ecclesiology that locates the source of *all* ministry and empowerment in the waters of baptism rather than ordination. Clericalism can dangerously reduce discernment to an authoritarian judgment by a priest, equating his or her position on some issue with that of God's, instead of an intentional community enterprise borne out of prayer and humility.

There are a number of dominant cultural values that can be a barrier to the work of spiritual discernment. Rugged individualism works against the *communal* dimension of this enterprise and impedes the understanding that truth is larger than our own personal perceptions and often can only be discovered in community. An over-valuing of independence limits our ability to let go of personal control, acknowledge our need for God to guide us, and trust that God will reveal to us what we need to know for this time.

Many of us are still held in the tyranny of rationalism and are oversuspicious of ways of knowing beyond empirical and systematic approaches, fearing distortions of the truth by emotion, subjectivity, and superstition. The Enlightenment did free religion from much that was superstitious and subject to irrational control. However, some ways of knowing are intuitively based and call for the art of embracing mystery rather than the method of logical analysis. Some knowing is borne out of contemplative prayer or listening to the dream's wisdom. The work of Terry Holmes on spiritual quadrants, further typified by Corinne Ware as four spiritual paths

⁴²See Title I, Canon 14, Section 2 and Title III, Canon 14, Sect. 1(a) of the "Constitution & Canons" of the Episcopal Church. Diocesan canons also regulate vestry activity.

(head, heart, mystic and kingdom), helps people to understand that our capacity for encountering God is far greater than our “preferred” spiritual path.⁴³

Transformation can begin with discerning the “spirit” of the governance board’s agenda. What drives a church board meeting’s agenda? Is the underlying force a drive for efficiency or an anxious need to justify the church as a financial and numerical success? If leaders provide a way to bring the underlying forces that drive the agenda to consciousness and name them accurately, while holding to a desire to more deeply convert the meeting to attentiveness on God’s purposes, the board is on the way to having transformed meetings and a transformed church. Symbol guidance and communal spiritual discernment processes will guide the way.

Many of us are concerned about the level of factionalism and destructive conflict occurring in our churches. One of the important contributions that incorporating spiritual discernment principles and practices can make in faith communities is the shift that is likely to occur from a primary mode of problem solving and anxious fixing to deeper listening to each other and trusting in God’s ability to give guidance in the assembly. We still need critical thinking and the capacity to deal effectively with problems, but there is a right time for analysis and evaluation in a process centered on the work of discovering God’s direction for a church – analytic thinking is not to dominate the whole of the process. There is something more to the process: an invitation to seek God’s kingdom first and attend to our relationship with God. There is something more that calls even parties in conflict to seek a deeper listening for God in the midst of the dispute, seeking a grace-filled understanding that transcends the truths of the

⁴³See Urban T. Holmes, III, *A History of Christian Spirituality: An Analytical Introduction* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) and Corinne Ware, *Discover Your Spiritual Type: A Guide to Individual and Congregational Growth*, (New York: The Alban Institute, 1995).

disputants and can call everyone to witness a new birth. But people need to be led into the reality of that prayerful mystery by those who are themselves centered in the ongoing life of discernment and contemplative awareness. It is possible that the Church is being invited by the spirit of Christ to follow a transformative path from discord to discernment.

The Episcopal Church is in the beginning stages of exploring how decision-making processes at vestry meetings or annual parish meetings or larger church councils can wed spiritual discernment principles and practices with sound fiscal and business practices, with laity and clergy as full spiritual partners in the enterprise. This project is a step in nurturing another dimension of communal faith development.

To have the mind of Christ. God desires our churches to become communities so engaged in spiritual discernment that they discover in joy and wonder that “we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16b). The deepest dimension of spiritual discernment is to “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). This is an audacious claim – it was when Paul made it to his communities and it is now. Its fulfillment, as momentary as that may be, depends both on the desire of church leaders to know Christ’s direction for their communities and on their capacity for self-emptying to become free to receive the grace of God. I have seen this grace at work in individual spiritual direction and on occasion as a parish has faced an important decision. But to make this the focus of a project in a parish and to witness a people coming to the awareness that they are capable of spiritual discernment, of being at-one with the mind of Christ, this is good news to proclaim!

APPENDIX 1: PARISH CORRESPONDENCE AND RECORDS

Parish Announcement of Discernment Program

Dear Parish Family,

On Sunday, Feb. 18, St. Clement's will hold the first of several sessions, facilitated by the Rev. Dan Prechtel, aimed at teaching us the skills and techniques needed to discern God's will for us both as individuals and as a parish. The ultimate goals of these sessions will be 1) to make discernment an integral part of all future parish decision-making, and 2) to form a discernment support/advisory group within the parish which will assist the vestry in its deliberations and also work with individuals who face questions, crises and decisions in their personal lives.

The skills learned or honed in these sessions will be valuable as we set our parish goals for the near and distant future, and as we decide what we will seek in terms of a new rector for St. Clement's.

We have contracted with Fr. Prechtel for a total of 25 hours. The first 5 sessions, described above, will consist of 6-8 hours presented in 1 to 1 1/2 hour segments following the 10:00 mass on Feb. 18, March 4, 18 and 25, and April 8. We hope that as many people as possible will attend these first 5 sessions, which will double as our parish Lenten program this year and should prove helpful for our individual as well as our parish spiritual growth. After the initial parish-wide segment, Fr. Prechtel will continue to work with those who choose to go on as members of the discernment support/advisory group. This second phase of the program will begin in late April.

Please mark your calendars for the dates given above and join us for this important step in determining where we go next as a parish (with the added bonus of some personal spiritual growth for each of us as well!). If you can't attend all five sessions, come to as many as you can. See you Feb. 18.

Email of 8-28-01 about Vestry Meeting of 8-25 Showing Discernment Training Impact

Dear Dan,

It was the best vestry meeting I'd been to in years! [Bridget] will probably send you a copy of the letter to the parish that came out of it. It lists our results and encourages everyone to be there for the meeting on the 16th, so I won't go into detail on that here. I felt that the discussion about clergy presence (interim and permanent) was thoughtful and recognized many of the realities we are facing. [One of the vestry members] raised a good question we couldn't answer and so set aside for answers from the diocese: How much would part-time cost? Our working answer was half of full-time. If the one is \$50,000; then \$25,000. I wonder how close to correct we were — also if we can afford even that much.

All people who attended the discernment phase II training spoke highly of it and what we had learned as individuals and as a group. I think there was some disappointment that we couldn't report in great detail, but an acceptance that there might be confidentiality issues as well as techniques that seem like nothing until you experience them -- the angel exercise, African Bible study, clearness committee — and these were promised for later.

Some of the other strides that I attribute to our discernment training --

- [Bridget and Deborah] distributed a list of possible clergy configurations the week before, so we had time to list our priorities and those who couldn't be there could send their opinions.
- The group automatically formed a circle around two tables, though the die-hards resisted the suggestion to push them together.
- [Deborah] distributed an agenda, which we followed closely though some items were re-ordered and the big discussion left for the end.
- Financial reports were distributed at the end of the meeting (1:30) rather than the beginning and were not discussed at all. [Deborah] said we could call if we had questions!
- Non-vestry members [Irene & Mark] (because of discernment) and Paul Shelton (as an expert on the air conditioner we're thinking about purchasing) attended. Especially pleasing was that Paul stayed until the end, though he could easily have left earlier.
- At [Irene's] suggestion, the meeting opened with a few minutes of silent prayer and there were very few of the kind of side conversations and jokes that mark most St. C meetings and classes.
- When the meeting threatened to get sidetracked onto discussion of copyright law (in relation to Xeroxing music), I finally raised my hand and requested that we move on since copyright's a broad and interesting topic that could take many hours and we had important things to discuss as a vestry. That's something I probably wouldn't have done before the discernment training. (I also volunteered to bring [Thomas] some info on the law.)
- The letter and the priorities it lists were arrived at by consensus using a numbering system and the blackboard to count for the top three. The bottom three were easy and unanimous in their ordering. (Didn't really have to think to put closing, merging, or sharing clergy with another church at the bottom.)

An aside: When [Bridget] remarked that the Diocese doesn't seem to be aware of us, [Mark], who had attended a youth training session at LTS the day before, responded that people (Sue Cromer, the Bishop) knew about St. C. and [Deborah]. Hmmm. Perhaps it's only the deployment office....

Anyhow it was a good meeting and kudos go to you for the training and [Deborah] and [Bridget] for all the preparation they put into making the it a good one that truly moved us forward.

[Hilda]

**POSSIBLE OPTIONS FOR
CLERGY ARRANGEMENTS
FOR ST. CLEMENT'S**

Listed below in order of the Vestry's preference are possible options for the future of St. Clement's regarding the hiring of new clergy. We have agreed that at this time we can neither afford, nor do we need, a full-time person. Therefore all options refer to hiring someone part-time.

- 1) Part-time priest who only needs/wants part-time employment.
- 2) Part-time "worker" priest (someone who has another job which provides some or most of their income).
- 3) Retired priest willing to work on a limited part-time basis (probably mainly Sunday services, sick calls, maybe one other day per week).
- 4) Part-time clergy shared with a) other small Episcopal parish/mission b) small Lutheran congregation
- 5) Merge with other small Episcopal parish/mission.
- 6) Close the parish (NOTE: This is not an option favored by any of the Vestry members, but it is an option, and we therefore added it to the list.)

The Vestry discussed the fact that, given the realities of the clergy market and our finances, we may not be able to have the arrangement we most prefer, and that we must be willing to be flexible and perhaps rearrange our priorities down the road.

We have also decided that, since we will almost surely still be in "search mode" for some time to come, we need to look at the possibility of hiring an interim priest to provide some stability to the parish during the search process.

(A Statement to the parish following the vestry meeting of August 25, 2001)

Exploring the Possibilities for Connections with Area Churches and Calling a Priest

St. Clement's Church

Notes from meetings with Diocesan Clergy

Sunday, September 16, 2001 all members with the Rev. Sheila Ferguson

St. Clement's parish has:

... 18-21 pledging units

... 67 members

... annual pledged income of about \$35,000; with about \$10,000 additional income

... Franklin Fund with a balance of about \$10,000 is used for emergencies

Some facts/generalizations/suggestions from Sheila –

... 100 members can support a half-time priest who is low on the payment scale easily/comfortably.

... Small congregations find it difficult to use most of the readily available Christian education materials.

... It takes 20 members to be a mission; 25 to be a parish.

... One year's full time clergy package at the diocesan minimum is \$34,000 – without health insurance. Half-time would be about \$17,000.

... Aliens must have work permits; many are here on student visas.

... Set some deadlines. Explore all options.

Sunday, September 23, 2001, Vestry with the Rev. Tim Hall.

Observations/information/recommendations from Tim –

... We have strong lay leadership and will find it difficult to go back to a "Father knows best" model.

... The canons provide for a lay "vicar in charge," who has the authority of a priest.

... We form a coherent group with a strong spiritual center. This is evident to anyone who comes in.

... Look at ministry in the entire south suburban area. Perhaps we are being called to minister to members of other small churches (e.g. Blue Island, Chicago Heights).

... We have a strong commitment to Harvey.

... Two weak churches will not make one strong one if they merge.

... Perhaps we could band together with other small churches in the area to contract for pastoral services.

... Areas mentioned where some would like more consistent clergy leadership: liturgy, Christian education, and outreach during pantry.

... We want a priest who is excited to be a part of us – not just someone who will take the job.

Possibilities discussed (all with churches we know, two from Lenten programs), which will be researched with reports to be given at the October 14 vestry meeting:

... First Lutheran Church in Harvey. We have a long friendship with them. [Assigned persons] will contact Pastor Knutson to continue earlier informal discussions.

... St. Joseph & St. Aidan in Blue Island. Sheila was meeting with them today. Their Hispanic congregation has mostly disappeared and Sunday attendance is low. They have an endowment. [Assigned person] will contact [a person there].

... St. Ambrose in Chicago Heights. They, too, have a strong core. [An assigned person] will find out and initiate discussions with them.

ST. CLEMENT' S PARISH DISCUSSION
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2001
Some Notes by [Hilda]

Fr. Prechtel presented the Parish with a singing bowl, which was accepted with great joy. And used it to lead a meditation before the group began consideration of several questions about the discernment process we have been through during the past year.

Question: How have you and the church been affected/changed?

[Irene]: As a group we have a purpose/mission. Commitment has increased. We know that what we must do is here.

[Parishioner 1]: Increased closeness to God. We have better understanding and able to see signs about directions we should take.

[Bridget]: We have more awareness of discernment as something to pursue actively. We have changed our focus to what it is we're supposed to do and what we need to do it from what do we have to do to survive.

[Deborah]: Opened to accept change without being obstinate about it. We're ready to accept things about the church we'd not been ready to accept before.

[Mark]: Understand your abilities and concentrate them. If one has a talent (even one he doesn't like), it should be used. For example, [Mark's] work with children.

[Thomas]: Not having a priest relieved us of that financial responsibility for the year and now the bills are paid. Financial responsibility is an important part of running a church. Things have worked better without a priest. More relaxed.

Question: What is God inviting us to do?

[Mark]: We know we can do what we want to. The path is open. Challenge is which path to take. No longer using the word, can't. We have collective unity.

[Irene]: I'm not as fearful of losing something I cherish in this church (e.g. the music) if we bring in a new priest. Now see that we must share what we have with others in the community and that may mean change. We should preserve and defend what we have in order to share it with others.

[Bridget]: We're starting to behave as a group based on what we think we're supposed to do rather than on a business model. If this is what you're supposed to do it will happen. Get over old hangs ups and move on.

[Parishioner 1]: If we bless God, we will be rewarded in ways that are both tangible and intangible. God is acting through people. God gives you things you don't ask for.

Question: Our recommendations for Fr. Prechtel's future work with similar groups. What was particularly valuable?

This kind of work takes patience. Guided imagery and dream work were particularly valuable -- both for those who shared dreams and those never remember their own dreams but gained insights from those of others. The most fruitful time was that spent practicing specific techniques.

[Miriam] shared her dream about St. Clement's with the group. It is about [her], but also about US. The dream colors have moved from black to peach and champagne. And our mood has changed from mourning to hope.

[The following was a synopsis of the dream:]

Limo was champagne like the limo at the wedding [Miriam] attended last week in Texas. The casket was open at first and now it is closed.

The dream is about more than the death of [Peter]. Fr. Brady and [another parish family] left too.

Marriage is a symbol of unity and festivity and also a major change.

We are more independent, taking on responsibilities we hadn't before. This is where we'll make it happen.

[Parishioner 2] also had a dream about [Peter]. It was at a party in the church after Christmas and in color.

[Thomas] had a question on today's gospel (the least in heaven is greater than John the Baptist). The response: John was the greatest of the prophets, the old way. Jesus brings a new way of seeing the world and God.

Today we've been talking about how St. Clement's is moving from the old to the new. We have the mind of Christ.

MISSION STATEMENT ST. CLEMENT'S CHURCH

St. Clement's Church strives to fulfill the command of our Lord Jesus Christ to "Feed My Sheep", - in body, mind, and spirit.

We feed the **body** by providing food and clothing to our community as needed, and actively inviting all to join us in our worship and fellowship.

We feed the **mind** by providing opportunities for all to engage in study, dialogue, and prayer around scripture, and God's purpose in our lives.

We feed the **spirit** by providing worship that is holy, welcoming, loving, diverse, and scriptural, and by bringing others to the knowledge and love of God, the saving power of Jesus Christ, and the comfort and blessing of the Holy Spirit.

VALUES

Because we believe in our calling to stay and serve, we value the opportunity and potential presented to us in this community to fulfill God's purpose here.

Because we believe in God as the Creator of all things, we value the beauty of the earth and the fruits it produces through our efforts and the wonders of God's growing and healing powers.

Because we believe that all humankind are created in the image of God in both mind and spirit, we value the ability of all to fulfill the purpose God has given to their lives.

Because we believe that we come to know the will of God through scripture, prayer, reason, and tradition, we value the opportunity to study, pray, meditate, and communicate.

Because we believe that we are all children of God, we rejoice in the diversity of our congregation in all its facets.

Because we believe in the glory, majesty, power, and love of God, we value our ability to praise and worship Him with instruments, liturgy, and song.

(Adopted at Annual Parish Meeting, January 27, 2002)

APPENDIX 2: TRAINING OUTLINES AND MATERIALS

First General Session Outline

General Formation Program on Spiritual Discernment

St. Clement's Episcopal Church, Harvey, IL. with the Rev. Daniel Prechtel

Session 1 (Feb. 18, 1 ½ hours) What is Spiritual Discernment?

“Listening for God” exercise

(Use meditation chime.) Follow sound into a deeper quiet inner place.

Take a few minutes to focus your awareness on external sounds. How might the external sounds and sights that come and go perhaps be voices of God in creation or be signs of the presence of God? Do not try to analyze everything, just make a little note to yourself about what you notice and how you feel about it.

Now take a few minutes to focus your awareness on internal activity. What within you do you notice that might be the voice of God or point to the presence of God? Again, do not try to analyze everything, just make a little note to yourself about what you notice and how you feel about it.

I will now use the meditation chime again. Follow the sound back out to a more active, normal state of consciousness. (Use meditation chime.)

Take a few minutes to jot down anything about this awareness exercise that you want to remember. Share in twos or threes. General discussion.

What does the word “discernment” mean to you?

How have you heard the word used?

Some definitions from Morris and Farnham

Scriptural basis for spiritual discernment

Brief overview of biblical developments

Some scripture passages addressing qualities of spiritual discernment (handout)

What kind of God are we dealing with? Will/Desire

“Names of God” exercise

How do the names or qualities express our relationship to the divine and God's desire (relational) or will (volitional/legal command)?

General Principles of Discernment

Aids to Discerning God's Presence and Leadings in Life (handout)

Signs of God's Call (handout)

Obstacles to Discernment (handout)

This week: For your journal...Reflect on how you have made decisions in your life. What spiritual practices have you (and your partner, family) used to try to discover God's direction for your lives? How is your understanding of (naming) God helpful to the way you would like to practice spiritual discernment and/or how does it limit your ability to be spiritually discerning?

Aids to Discerning God's Presence and Leadings in Life

Ongoing spiritual discernment within the Christian spiritual tradition assumes regular practices of joining the community of believers for worship, personal self-examination of conscience, being a prayerful person, and being informed by scripture and other spiritual resources.

When reading scripture look for the "living Word" amidst the many words. In your reading do you encounter a passage, phrase, or scene that holds particular energy for you--challenging, strengthening, or otherwise engaging you?

Cultivate a habit of looking for the traces of God's presence in ordinary circumstances of life. Live with a sense of "wondering where God is in this."

Seek out and maintain regular connections with a small group, or some special friend or companion, or a formal spiritual director that respects your desire for spiritual insight and a deeper relationship with God.

Follow the call to active service and compassion in our world. We believe Christ is especially present in places and situations of suffering and in the struggles for greater healing and freedom. Spiritual life is not the journey inward alone, but in encountering the indwelling Holy One, we are given love and gifts to share in our outward life--taking our small place in God's realm of justice, mercy, and reconciliation.

Spiritual discernment and an awareness of the presence of God is not something we can make happen. The ability to make sound spiritual discernment and to be aware of the sacred presence is a gift from God. Our responsibility is to live our lives with an ongoing attentiveness to the sacred dimension, and an ongoing openness to receiving awarenesses of God's presence and promptings in whatever way these may come to us.

Dan Prechtel, 3-14-99

Signs of God's Call

Peace--the central sign. Peace does not mean an absence of trouble. Rather it means a firm conviction, even in the midst of turmoil, that *the Lord is risen* and that "all shall be well." Serenity is its manifestation. But beware of false peace. This can come from escaping an unhappy situation, denying painful realities, avoiding a cross, or making a decision (even one that is wrong) merely to terminate a crisis of indecision. If the peace endures through ups and downs, then we have confirmation that it is authentic.

Joy--a deep interior joy that is unselfconscious and uninhibited.

A temporary experience of disorientation, followed by calm and serenity.

Tears that are comforting and tranquilizing, rather than disturbing and fatiguing.

A sudden sense of clarity.

Strands of experience that seemed unrelated begin to converge and fit together.

Persistence--the message keeps recurring through different channels.

Listening Hearts, Suzanne Farnham, et al., pp. 46-47.

Obstacles to Discernment

Culture. Cultural values emphasizing competition, success, productivity, self-sufficiency, individualism, or material progress may impede discernment.

Prosperity. Prosperity knits a person to the world. “I spoke to you in your prosperity, but you said, ‘I will not listen’” (Jer. 22:21).

Self-interest. We need to free ourselves from the trap of self-interest that so grasps and clutches that it gets in the way of a free and open relationship with God and with others. God begins where clinging to things ends.

Self-absorption. Ambition and self-absorption obstruct discernment.

Self-righteousness. To be sure we are living in God’s light is a sign of spiritual smugness and an impediment to discerning God’s call.

Desire for security. Our desire for security and control interferes with our ability to hear God’s call.

Desire for certainty. To insist on an exact answer diminishes our freedom to listen.

Human time frames. Our own timetables impair our ability to let God point the way.

Self-doubt. If we do not think we are good enough, we may not believe we can be useful to God and may be unable to pursue God’s call. Moses was fortunate that God would not accept his response of personal inadequacy. We need to act on our best understanding of what God wants, praying that God will correct us if we have misunderstood.

Listening Hearts, Suzanne Farnham, et al., pp. 36-37.

Second General Session Outline

Session 2 (March 4, 1 ½ hours) Individual Spiritual Discernment

Traditions: Desert Elders; Ignatian; Carmelite

Follow-up from last session

Traditions that influence individual spiritual discernment

Desert Elders (4th - 6th century):

Refer to sermon and following a thought to its source.

Anthropology of tripartite soul

Personal spiritual rule

Guidance from the Amma/Abba

Foundation for monasticism

Ignatian Tradition--Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556):

Founder of Society of Jesus, Jesuits

Spiritual Exercises (30 day retreat)

Imagination in meditations, affective dimension, seeing God in everything, foundation of God's love—and our deepest desire is God's desire for us, holy indifference, rules and process for spiritual discernment

Handout "Notes on Ignatian Spiritual Discernment"

Carmelite Spiritual Tradition--Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) John of the Cross (1542-1591)

Preconditions for discernment:

Solitary prayer—listening with loving attentiveness to God

Prayer goes through stages—Teresa

Desire for truth

"Dark nights" of the purification of spirit and soul,

"luminous darkness" (John)

Openness to the outcome—true letting-go of the outcome to God in faith

"Nada and Toto"—having nothing, I have everything (John)

Willingness to wait with patience but with eager expectation

Movements: normally divergence—convergence—emergence

Fruit of the Spirit as test of discernment (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-discipline—Galatians 5:19-23)

For your reflection for the next two weeks:

Is there something calling for a choice in your life that you wish to be with in spiritual discernment?

Review the material and discussions we have had so far and see what might be helpful to apply. In this interval between classes if it is helpful to you keep a running journal account about what happens to you as you seek discernment.

Another possibility—try to apply the desert elders tradition of discerning the origin of some of the thoughts that come to you by trying to follow the thought to its source. What name would you give to the various sources of these thoughts?

Sermon 3-4-01 with Desert Elders

1 Lent C

Deuteronomy 26:5-11; Luke 4:1-13

The Desert Elders—8 Deadly Thoughts

What good fortune that as we are moving deeper into a parish study on spiritual discernment we hear about discernment in action in Jesus' life. The gospel story of Jesus' temptation in the desert wilderness is, at heart, a story of his properly naming and resisting the source for impulses that would take him away from God. Thomas Keating, a Cistercian monk and leader of the centering prayer movement speaks of three "false emotional programs for happiness": the needs for security, esteem/affection, and power. Where we ought to center the satisfaction of those needs in God, it is easy to get misled and find that we build our lives around attempting to satisfy one of those needs without a deep reliance on God. In the temptations that Jesus faced we might be able to see those false emotional programs for happiness: turning a stone into bread as a way of satisfying a need for security; the lure of glory and authority over the kingdoms of the world as a satisfaction for the need for power; and testing God's relationship to Jesus as the son as satisfying the anxiety over esteem and affection. The point I would like us to understand is that Jesus, in his desert encounter with the devil, discerns within himself the origin of the thoughts that arise following an extended period of fasting—and truly name them as temptations to be rejected in favor of a reliance on God.

Three hundred years later a group of Christian hermits began moving into the desert wildernesses outside major Egyptian and Middle Eastern centers, largely in reaction to the "Christianization" of the Empire following Constantine. Before, to be a Christian meant being willing to face possible persecution and even blood martyrdom. Now, this faith could get you a better job and social privileges. The old time of testing was gone, and a new era of a tamed and diluted Christianity had begun. So some in Christianity began to move away from the cultural centers and voluntarily tested and toughened their faith in the harshness of the desert wilderness. This movement to the desert from the fourth to the sixth century became known as the Desert Elders tradition in Christian history. The desert fathers and mothers (*abbas* and *ammās*) learned, like Jesus in the wilderness, how to do spiritual combat with their inner demons and how to listen to the inner voice of God. The language of spiritual discernment for them centered around following the thoughts that would arise within them to their source: from their own human origins, or God, or from demonic influences. It was a kind of spiritual psychology that we could benefit from learning, too.

Evagrius, a desert monk who was the spiritual elder of John Cassian, taught that in the practice of following thoughts to their source there are eight deadly thoughts. These thoughts, are deadly because they can stir up our passions and create emotional turbulence, disordering us and separating us from a deep connection with God. These eight thoughts are: gluttony, lust, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia (later in the tradition called sloth), vainglory, and pride. These in later tradition get changed into the "seven deadly sins" of gluttony, lust, greed, anger, sloth, envy, and pride. But in this earlier tradition of the desert the emphasis is on what we *do* with the thoughts—the temptations—and that to endure temptation is not the same thing as to sin. Thoughts can come to us without our bidding.

For example, in the desert tradition there is an understanding that at times we might be tempted, sometimes ferociously so, to turn from a deeply dedicated Christian life and set of values. The thought was called "acedia" and it was known as the "demon of the noonday sun". It would bring the monk to question why he or she has spent years in the scorching heat and scarcity of the desert in the disciplines of silence and prayer and fasting when everyone else is having a good time in the high culture of the

city. Why not go back? After all, there are Christians there, too. And what difference, really, has all this deprivation made? Why not be a normal person, enjoying a normal life?... I expect you can understand how this particular demon of spiritual boredom and apathy could sap the spiritual energy from them and lead to spiritual depression and despair.

One saying of the desert warned the monks that although the deadly thoughts *are* thoughts and not sins until you harbor them, watch out that you don't! It is as if a scrawny little demon comes and knocks on your door. Beware that instead of sending it scurrying away you welcome it into your hut, bid it rest itself, give it some nourishing food and drink, and invite it to stay awhile. Pretty soon what began as a vexing little temptation, a thought to be resisted and disowned, has turned into a sin and the demon has grown big and strong and found comfortable lodging in your soul.

Evagrius taught that the ordered soul, the person who is disciplined and dedicated to the spiritual wholeness of God, while challenging the deadly thoughts, will also experience the growth of eight virtues that are in contrast to those eight deadly thoughts: prudence, understanding, wisdom, temperance, charity, continence, courage and patience—and justice will be a product of that ordered life.

The desert monks realized that they could not do this work of discernment and spiritual growth by themselves alone. They found a spiritual father or mother, an *abba* or *amma* to confide in and serve as their guide. Although the desire for purity of heart and personal holiness required deep individual commitment and discipline, yet they were aware that they could not be a Christian alone but needed the wise counsel and support of others—their spiritual brothers or sisters and the guidance of an elder.

So as we enter into the church season of Lent and remember Jesus' time of fasting and prayer, his confrontation with the devil, and his deepened sense of his own purpose in life born out of his baptism and desert struggle for awareness, let us also take up those ancient tools for awareness and spiritual discernment in our own lives. After all, the eight deadly thoughts didn't just go away following the time of the desert elders. They are a way of naming *our own* spiritual vulnerabilities too! So, like the desert elders of our rich Christian tradition let us also follow our thoughts to their source—being wise in the ways that open us to spiritual growth and defend us from the temptations that would disorder our lives. Others have gone before us to point out the way—Jesus Christ himself being the foremost of our teachers.

Assumptions for Individual and Communal Spiritual Discernment:

God desires interrelationship with individuals and communities in contemporary times.

God seeks to provide directions for a faith community's (and for individuals within the community) most authentic development, which the spiritual tradition calls the "will of God."

Individuals and communities can learn how to more sensitively discover God's direction for them, which in the tradition is called "spiritual discernment."

The Church has as part of its tradition tools of spiritual discernment that can be applied to contemporary needs for communal spiritual direction and decision-making.

God often communicates through a combination of receptive and imaginative forms of prayer, formational use of scripture, and the emergence of primary symbols through such sources as dreams and active imagination.

Daniel Prechtel, 2/01

Spiritual Exercises “Rules for the Discernment of Spirits,” is a collection of guidelines for discernment that focus on the affective movements toward God (consolation) or away from God (desolation), the source of such movements being good or evil spirits.

Spiritual consolation describes movements in our interior life when we find ourselves: So on fire with the love of God that everything and everyone is seen in the context of God. Saddened at our own infidelity to God, but at the same time thankful to know God as our Savior. Strengthened by the increase in our life of faith, hope and love--and deep peace.

Spiritual desolation describes movements in our interior life when we find ourselves: Enmeshed in turmoil of spirit or feeling weighed down by darkness. Experiencing a lack of faith or hope or love; distaste for prayer or spiritual activity. Experiencing the opposite effect of what has been described as consolation. Ignatius gives four guidelines dealing with times of spiritual desolation:

When in desolation try not to change decisions or come to new decisions. We should change ourselves against the desolation by such practices as intensifying our prayer and fighting whatever is afflicting us. We should be aware that in times of desolation we might feel abandoned by God, but by faith we can know that God is always with us by grace. Patience is the most important attitude to nourish in times of desolation, expecting that God’s gift of consolation will come to us again in the future.

Three reasons why we experience desolations are:
It may be our own fault due to spiritual tepidity, slothfulness, and negligence.
It may be a trial period allowed by God to test us in loving God above the consolations God might give us.
It might be a way God lets us know our own spiritual poverty and need, so that we understand that spiritual consolations are God’s gifts and not ours to control.

Two guidelines deal with spiritual consolations:
We should savor the strength received in the time of consolation to be used when in desolation. When in a time of consolation we can be humble and grateful to God for the gifts we received, but when in desolation we can draw strength from the expectation that God will give us the grace we need.

Ignatius also gives some guidelines related to consolations and desolations that tend to be more useful with the second week:
God and the good spirits tend to give support, encouragement, and joy as we follow the call of the Lord in our life. The evil spirit generally acts to bring about the opposite reaction, arousing dissatisfaction with our efforts, raising doubts and anxieties about God’s love or our response, and stinging the conscience with thoughts of pride in our attempt to lead a good life. God alone can bring about consolation without a preceding cause. When there is a reason for consolation either a good or evil spirit could be involved. If a good spirit, the effect is to strengthen and speed our progress in Christ. If an evil spirit, the effect is to try to draw our attention to wrong things, or to pursue a more selfish motivation, or to become more willful. When the consolation is spurious it may be from an evil spirit that appears as an angel of light and slowly distorts thoughts and desires. We can examine carefully the whole course of an experience to see if it remained fixed on the Lord or started off well but ends leaving us spiritually weakened or desolate or confused.

A review of the whole progression of thoughts or actions can be helpful when we have been duped by an evil spirit. The review can help us more quickly catch ourselves the next time an evil spirit tries to manipulate us.

As we progress in our spiritual life, the movement of a good spirit is very delicate, gentle, and delightful--like a drop of water penetrating a sponge. But the evil spirit tries to interrupt our progress by movements that are violent, disturbing, and confusing--like a drop of water hitting a stone.

The *Spiritual Exercises* also gives particular guidance on making an “election” or choice of a state or way of life. This is a major focus of intention in the Ignatian retreat design--to deepen our relationship and commitment to Christ and to choose vocational directions and make decisions that attempt to be in accord with Christ’s desire for us. Ignatius outlines two patterns for making sound decisions in such matters.

The first pattern of making a good choice goes as follows:

Clearly place before my mind what it is I want to decide about.

Try to be like a balance at equilibrium, without leaning to one side or the other. My end is before me, but I am free as I possibly can be toward the object of my choice.

Pray that God enlightens and moves me in the way leading to God’s desire. Then I use my understanding to weigh the matter carefully and attempt to come to a decision consonant with living out God’s will for me.

List and weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the alternative decisions.

Consider which alternative seems more reasonable.

Turn this decision to God and ask God to accept and confirm it if it is for the Lord’s greater service and glory.

The second pattern for making a correct and good choice is:

Since the love of God should be the motive for my life, I should check myself whether my greater or lesser attachment for the object of choice is solely because of my Creator and Lord.

I imagine that someone else is seeking to make the same choice for the best and has asked me to help guide him or her. I see what I would say to that person and then I observe that advice for myself. If I were at the moment of death and so would have the clarity of that time, what would be the decision that I would want to have made now?

I imagine myself standing before Christ my Judge when this life has ended, and I think about what I would then want to say about this decision. I choose now the course of action which I feel will give me happiness and joy in presenting it to Christ on the day of judgment.

David L. Fleming, S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises: A Literal Translation and A Contemporary Reading*, (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978).

Third General Session Outline

Session 3 (March 18, 1 ½ hours) Communal Spiritual Discernment

Traditions: Benedictine, Ignatian *Society of Jesus*, Anglican, Wesleyan, Quaker

Follow-up from last session:

Traditions that influence communal spiritual discernment

Benedictine Spiritual Tradition (6th Century to present):

Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-c.550) and his sister Scholastica

Living under an ordered Rule (*Regula*)

Sources included St. Basil's *Rules*, John Cassian and Desert Elders, St. Augustine of Hippo, and especially the *Rule of the Master*

Intention of the Rule: establish a school for the Lord's service (Pro. 45-50)

Values emphasized: humility, balance, simplicity, moderation, community, work and prayer, lives shaped by *lectio divina* (holy reading—eventually in the 12th century moving into a pattern of reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation).

Vows: stability, obedience, and ongoing conversion.

Chapter 3 of the Rule: Summoning the brothers for counsel

As often as anything important is to be done in the monastery, the abbot shall call the whole community together and himself explain what the business is; and after hearing the advice of the brothers, let him ponder it and follow what he judges the wiser course. The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger. The brothers, for their part, are to express their opinions with all humility, and not presume to defend their own views obstinately. The decision is rather the abbot's to make, so that when he has determined what is more prudent, all may obey. Nevertheless, just as it is proper for disciples to obey their master, so it is becoming for the master on his part to settle everything with foresight and fairness.

Joan Chittister, O.S.B. comments on this portion of the *Rule*:

In the monastic community, this common search for truth is pitched at a delicate balance. The abbot and prioress are clearly not dictators, but the community is not a voting bloc either. They are each to speak their truth, to share the perspective from which they see a situation, to raise their questions and to open their hearts, with honesty and with trust. The prioress and abbot are to listen carefully for what they could not find in their own souls and to make a decision only when they can come to peace with it, weighing both the community's concerns and the heart they have for carrying the decision through. "Foresight and fairness" are essentials for leaders who lead out of a sense of Benedictine spirituality.

(Joan Chittister, O.S.B., *The Rule of St. Benedict: Insight for the Ages*, (New York: Crossroad, 1997), pp. 48-49.)

[follow-up on meditation at sermon time on Moses' call to mission]

Continue presentation next session.

For your reflection in this next week:

Community in support of the person: Think about how your social networks of support (special friends, spouse/partner, family, church members, business associates, etc.) assist you in finding your way in life and in making decisions that lead to greater wholeness.

Community in its own discernment: Think about how your family makes (or made) decisions that affect everyone. Also, consider how your church makes its decisions and finds its purposes as a community of faith in Harvey and the broader community.

How do the great Christian traditions of spiritual discernment get echoed in those communal networks in your life? Are there important pieces missing from the ways your network of people support you? Are there important pieces missing from the way your community (church, family, business, etc.) deliberates on its directions and purpose, and makes decisions? What might be done?

Also for next week:

If you have had a dream recently related to St. Clement's Church please consider sharing it.

Sermon 3-18-01 with Guided Meditation on Mission

3 Lent C–March 18, 2001

Exodus 3:1-15 (ff.) Moses at the Burning Bush

Some stories are of defining moments in life where decisions are made that affect the course of history. Sacred scripture contain many of those stories where the divine and human interests intersect and people are called to make decisions. The story of Moses' encounter with Yahweh (I Am) at the burning bush is one of those great defining moments. In that critical event God revealed more of God's self to a suffering people and called Moses into the leadership role for God's confrontation with the powers of oppression and actions of liberation for an enslaved people. This story is a master story—it is a template for exploring our own understanding of God's desires for the world, and our call to be a people with a mission. Being a template, a master story, I am going to draw from two great Christian spiritual traditions, the Benedictine tradition of holy reading (*lectio divina*, which I'll have more to say about in our education time later this morning) and the Ignatian tradition of entering a scripture story with our imagination, and lead you in a meditation of this story as our story. However, first a comment on Moses' story.

The reading this morning did not include an important element of Moses' story. God, in response to the Israelites' suffering, tells Moses that he is being sent to Pharaoh for the release of God's people. Moses, in our lesson, does show hesitancy in taking up that call, expressing concern about whether he could be effective with either Pharaoh or the Israelites. What is not included is Moses' further resistance by asking "But suppose the Egyptians do not believe me or listen to me?" and also saying, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent ... I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." To the former objection Yahweh gives Moses miraculous powers (the staff turns into a serpent, his hand turns leprous and then restored again when he puts it into his cloak, and he pours some water from the Nile and on the ground whereupon it turns to blood). To the latter objection, God permits Moses' brother, Aaron, to be the speaker for him. The point is that Moses is facing a serious calling, and he resists, and God meets supplies him with what he needs to overcome his fears.

Now to our own meditation: Let's all take a big, full breath and exhale slowly. Again, as we breathe in let's invite God to be present with us in a very special way. As we breathe out, let's offer to God whatever tensions or anxieties are in us...

Imagine that right here, right now, for some mysterious reason beyond our control, our senses of sight and sound were temporarily able to perceive another dimension of reality that is normally hidden from us. Suddenly, in front where the gospel was proclaimed a bush has suddenly appeared that is full of gold and red fire. And out of this fire we hear God calling each one of us by name in a brief moment of time. Listen in the imagination of your soul for your name being called by the Holy One...

God says to us, "I am the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, I am Yahweh, I am the God of Jesus my Son and of Clement your patron saint. I have heard the plight of the people and I will have compassion of them. You, my congregation of St. Clement's Church, have a special role in my plan of healing and liberation in this area. This is what I want you to do for me." Now with the power of your imagination listen with your special ears and look with your special eyes and learn what God is wanting from you as a church in this area...Try to get as clear a sense of that calling as you are able...Feel free to imagine yourself speaking to God for clarification and hearing or seeing God's reply...

What concerns you about this sense of mission? In your imagination tell God whatever concerns you have for yourself and for the people of St. Clement's and listen for God's reply...Are there other concerns? If so bring them to God and listen for God's reply...

The Holy One may also have a special gift or blessing for the people of this church. Feel free to ask if this is so, and receive in your imagination whatever that special gift or blessing is...

Now our powers of imagination begin to slowly fade. The burning bush slowly dissolves from our sight, moving to a dimension beyond our normal vision.

Note how you have felt throughout this meditation, and how you now feel. Fix the insights you have received in your memory so you can share them later at our formation time. If you cannot stay after Eucharist, be sure to tell them to someone that is staying or write them down when you get home so you can share them later. Your imaginative prayer is part of the whole prayer of this community, and whatever was revealed to you is also for the benefit of the rest of this church.

Now, let's again take a big breath in and thank God for being with us in this special way. And as we breathe out let's all say "Amen."

Fourth General Session Outline

Session 4 (March 25, 1 ½ hours) Communal Spiritual Discernment Continued and The Power of Symbols to Guide Us

Ignatian Tradition—The Deliberations of 1539 in founding the Society of Jesus:

Some basic principles for group discernment from their deliberations:

Decisions were made in a context of seeking to know God’s will in the matter.

Discernment was a choice between two good paths that had equal validity.

The group chose to allow a lengthy period for discernment to be made.

The members of the group were free to do their own searching and praying and then re-form as a group to share their findings.

The deliberations used a pattern of discernment that was shaped by daily Christian prayer, meditation, sacramental worship, and amid the normal activities of life--yet with a special focus of intention.

The group sought unanimity. When a unanimous vote could not be attained on a later matter, the group still held for a pattern that provided a period of time of waiting before final votes.

Anglican Tradition (16th Century-present):

Sources of Authority—Scripture, Reason, Tradition

Via Media comprehensiveness-- “Protestant and Catholic” both/and

“Sacramental principle” and power of symbols

Wesleyan Tradition (18th Century Methodism):

Small group spiritual formation and discernment in the class and band system.

Now takes the form of “covenant groups.”

(See Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together*, pp. 33-34)

Quaker Tradition (17th Century-present):

Morris and Olsen (32-33, 129) point out salient Quaker contributions to communal discernment:

Belief in the witness of the inner light is central; the Spirit speaks to the individual and to the gathered community.

Silence is an essential practice.

They rely on group direction and shared leadership.

Arriving at a “sense of the meeting” is a movement toward consensus and beyond to an attempt to conclude an understanding of discernment of God’s will for the community.

Development of the Clearness Committee model for individuals seeking discernment and in membership and marriage questions before the community.

Handout: “Some Basic Tenants for Group Discernment”

The Power of Symbols to Guide Us

Ask whether anyone had a dream to share involving the church.

Has anyone had a dream that had a spiritual dimension to it that became a marker point or guide for them?

Look at multiple meanings of dreams and the multivalency of symbols

Christian primary symbols and root metaphors

Ritual process

What are primary symbols of this church community? What are some possible meanings? (Maybe take a walk around the church)

To consider over the next two weeks:

The next time we meet, April 8 (Palm/Passion Sunday), we will be finishing up the general formational program on spiritual discernment. After that your vestry will be looking at forming a discernment group that serves the parish. That group (which ought to include parish leaders and general parish members alike) will receive advanced training from me and will assist the vestry as an advisory body in communal spiritual discernment questions.

Ask yourself: *Is this additional training and particular way of service to your church community something you are being called by God to do?* This might be an important personal spiritual discernment question for you to engage using the understandings you have gained from our meetings so far.

Some Basic Tenets for Group Discernment:

The church is the body of Christ in the world today; as such, God has much to accomplish in and through us as we live and work together.

God is an active and living presence among us as we meet.

We need to remind ourselves repeatedly that it is the mind of Christ we are seeking in a given situation.

Insight into how God can best make use of us in a particular circumstance flows from the trust we have in God and the commitment we make to listening for God's guidance on the issues before us.

We must hold ourselves ready to respond with love and in obedience to what we understand to be God's call.

Prayer is central to discernment: prayer before we come to meetings, prayer, during the meetings, prayer after we leave a meeting. Prayer in silence. Undefended listening for the leading of the Holy Spirit. Teaching the heart to watch and wait.

Grounded in God, Suzanne Farnham, et al., pp.40-41.

DREAMWORK

SOME OF THE MULTIPLE LEVELS OF MEANING IN DREAMS

(ranging from the personal to the collective)

Physical Health Level--symbols for and/or commentary on health

Humor Level--look for the dream puns, "Freudian slips"

Personal Relationships Level--explores emotional energy in past and present relationships, sexual/libidinal desire (Freud)

"Will to Power & Competence" Level--explores hopes, plans, projects, goals, dominance/submission, in work and other areas of life interests (Adler)

Personal Integrative Level--various images, persons in dream are parts of the whole self (Gestalt)

Creative Level--source of solutions to personal or collective problems, source of works of artistry

Societal Level--dream includes symbols of our shared social experience of our age; common concerns & challenges

Archetypal Symbols Level--explores deep instinctual dimension of shared human drama within the "collective unconscious" (Jung)

Spiritual Development Level--numinous encounters with the holy (and evil) on personal or collective dimensions; source of inspiration, repentance, revelation, discernment

(Sources: Morton Kelsey, Jeremy Taylor, Dan Prechtel)

10 BASIC ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT DREAMS:

1. All dreams come in the service of health and wholeness.
2. No dream comes just to tell the dreamer what he or she already knows.
3. Only the dreamer can say with any certainty what meanings his or her dream may hold.
4. The dreamer's aha of recognition is a function of previously unconscious memory and is the only reliable touchstone of dreamwork.
5. There is no such thing as a dream with only one meaning.
6. All dreams speak a universal language of metaphor and symbol.
7. All dreams reflect inborn creativity and ability to face and solve life's problems.
8. All dreams reflect society as a whole, as well as the dreamer's relationship to it.
9. Working with dreams regularly improves relationships with friends, lovers, partners, parents, children, and others.
10. Working with dreams in groups builds community, intimacy, and support and begins to impact on society as a whole.

(Jeremy Taylor, *Where People Fly and Water Runs Uphill*, Warner Books, 1992, p. 11)

4 Lent C – March 25, 2001

St. Clement's, Harvey

Joshua 5:9-12; Ps. 34:1-8; 2 *Cor.* 5:17-21; *Luke* 15:11-32

Daniel Prechtel

(parable of the prodigal son; “new creation” in Christ, “ministry of reconciliation”, “made him to be sin who knew no sin, that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”)

Jesus' story of the younger and older son and their father, what has become known as the “parable of the prodigal son,” is probably one of the most treasured stories in Christianity and in world-wide sacred literature. In one sense a good story stands on its own and it is best not to analyze it and break it down into its component parts. It is a living thing, a complex network of symbols that are alive with meaning. So there is a part of me that just wants to tell the story and then shut up and trust that it will do its work in us. I've already repeated Jesus' story in reading the gospel and I'm sure that some of you would be perfectly happy if I did, in fact, now shut up and sit down. But I can't do that – sorry.

I expect that someone has told most of you that a parable is a special kind of story. It has the power to challenge in the hearer the conventional assumptions of what is right and wrong, of how the world is supposed to be. Jesus was very fond of using parables and it helped bring him to his date with the cross. As one theologian put it, Jesus himself is God's parable. We'll get to that later. Right now let's explore this story as having multiple levels of meaning.

To begin with, this story is included by the gospeler Luke, in a collection of three parables in reply by Jesus to a criticism by Pharisees that he welcomes sinners and eats with them. To this Jewish reformist group Jesus is diluting the saving power of Judaism by being too familiar with people engaging in behavior that is morally reprehensible. They should be challenged and shunned for their own good until they change their ways and follow the Law of God, not welcomed and offered the familiarity of shared food. According to the gospel, Jesus replies with parables about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and lost human relationships -- and the joy accompanying the lost being found.

Zooming in on the story of the sons and their father, it is important to understand that to an observant Jew there are multiple deaths in this story. The younger son is treating his father as if he is already dead when he impulsively demands for his share of the inheritance. When he squanders his inheritance in loose living he is morally dead in the judgment of the Law. That he eventually serves as a pig-keeper is the final death of a Jewish life since pigs are considered unclean animals and to have anything to do with providing care for them would be considered a total spiritual defilement and rejection of his religion. Considering the younger son's actions, his father as an obedient Jew has no choice but to literally grieve the death of his son. Of course, the elder son also treats his brother as dead. He has every right to do so, and in fact a responsibility to do so.

So, when the younger son “came to himself” or in another translation “came to his senses” – I would say when he hit bottom and could no longer deny the self-destructiveness of his life choices and patterns – he sought a return to his family but no longer as a family member. He knew that he could no longer claim that relationship. He would ask to be taken in as a hired hand. Here is another death. The death of a way of life that is self-centered, undisciplined, and merely pleasure-driven. But it is also a recognition that he himself brought on the death of his relationships. He can not go back the same as he left.

All this an observant Jew like Jesus, his disciples, and the Pharisees would understand. But now things change – the *parable* part of the story begins – the thing that turns upside down the expectations – the kind of thing that will bring Jesus to his own crucifixion. Contrary to his religious upbringing, the father has been waiting for this errant son. He cannot let him go. He runs to him and welcomes him as a son that died but now is alive. And he calls for the death of a fatted calf in order to celebrate the return of his son. A reconciliation beyond the boundaries of the Law has occurred...which the elder, righteous son cannot understand. To that son there is no joy, only disbelief and jealousy and continued rejection of his brother – even in the face of the father’s pleadings. There are two other deaths here. The calf is sacrificed for the feast. And the elder son is dead to joy, compassion, and the opportunity for reconciliation.

That’s Luke’s version of Jesus’ story in a way that a Jew would have understood it. And it was said in response to criticism that he was welcoming into his intimate presence people that would have been considered loathsome. If we move beyond the severe challenge that would have for Jesus’ critics – who were truly living rightly according to their religious tradition – to ourselves, what might be some of the possible implications of this story? For one thing – we might say that Jesus is the ultimate parable of God’s compassion that goes beyond the boundaries of religious decency. St. Paul writes that through Jesus Christ God “made him to be sin who knew no sin, that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” We are forgiven, loved sinners as well as gifted, creative saints – and we are made a new creation, the righteousness of God, ambassadors of Christ’s ministry of reconciliation in the world. With Christ there are no boundaries as to who is acceptable and not acceptable at the table of Eucharist (didn’t he eat with sinners?) and who belongs in the household of God. I think it was James Fenhagen who said that in the Episcopal Church we should have very soft and permeable boundaries around who gets to be an Episcopalian and a firm inner core around what it means to follow Christ.

But there is another possible meaning that we should look at in this parable -- that is the inner meaning of reconciliation. Isn’t there both something like a part of ourselves that is impulsive, pleasure-seeking, self-centered and another part of our selves that is boundaried, sticks to the rules, looks to the greater good, righteous? Don’t we tend to embody both the younger and elder son within us? If we cut ourselves off from one side or the other we pay a huge price. If we reject the free-wheeling side we can lose a lot of our inner creativity and vitality. If we deny that side of ourselves we will tend to find it, and hate it, in others while it could come out in us in ways we can’t recognize. If we banish the elder son in us to the shadows we can run amuck in a sea of broken relationships and addictions and rage at the elder son’s characteristics in others. We need Christ to bring both of those sides in us together to make us whole people. We need to invite them to share the good food together, and to let the little deaths and resurrections, the sins and forgiveness, and the reconciliations happen within us in the power of Christ who became sin for us. We need to trust in the healing power of Jesus and proclaim boldly that the Kingdom of God truly is among us and within us – within you and me.

Fifth General Session Outline

Session 5 (April 8, 1 ½ hours) Building a Discerning Church

Participant Observations of Impact

Hand out survey -- insufficient time to do them now

Spiritual Discernment Cycle for Individuals and Organizations

Detailed walk-through of this process

Summary of Discernment Modes

Individual supporting individual discernment (spiritual friend, spiritual director)

Community supporting individual discernment (listening hearts/clarity committee, parish discernment committee, small group direction)

Community supporting community discernment (vestry/clergy as discerning body, parish discernment group as advisory council to vestry and clergy)

Where do we go from here?

Advanced training opportunity and parish discernment group.

Spiritual Discernment Survey and Results

Total responses: 4
Parishioner: 0
Vestry member: 3
Warden: 1

Spiritual Discernment Survey

Name: _____

Age: _____ Gender: Male Female

Ethnicity: _____

What are your roles in the governance of this church community?

_____ Parishioner

_____ Member of Vestry/Bishop's Committee

_____ Warden

_____ Other church officer _____

Personal Spiritual Discernment

1. *How do you try to understand God's desire/will in your own life and the decisions you face?*

-I try to figure out how it will affect my life and would God want it that way.

-I just pray and meditate and ask for guidance when situations arise that are difficult or challenging. Through this process a solution does become evident.

-Listen to the people and events around me. Journal to let emotion spew out and sort out the chaff from the core of the issue.

-When facing a decision, I guess I mainly rely on what "feels" right. That in turn depends both on what seems best in the long run and what fits best with the values I've absorbed over the years from family, friends, church, etc. Over the years I've learned to be more patient about waiting for the "right" answer to come.

2. *Have you ever had a dream, vision, image, or a deep inner knowing that seemed to come from God in prayer or meditation that shaped the direction of your life or a decision in your life? If so, please discuss this.*

-I don't have a dream or wish--but I try to look for a sign from God to help me make a decision.

-When considering retirement in 1996 from my job as Clinical Dietitian after 40 years, I knew there was something else I wanted to do to continue to help people. This social service position appeared as a geriatric case manager and I knew then this was the job for me. I proceeded to get my resume together

and had the interview and after that meeting I knew that God had sent me in that direction and I am still working in that area part time now and enjoying every minute of it.

-Yes--once I heard a voice no one else did saying "I gave you you." Which I took to mean that I was of value to myself--my family--my job--my church as I am. That I don't need any things (ie, books, clothes, jewelery) to define me to my world.

-Freshman year in h.s., as I left a class in which I'd gotten lazy and was letting my grade slip, I thought, "I wish something would prod me to work harder at this again." The next day a failure warning for that class arrived in the mail. I was really upset all day, but as I got ready to go out that night (though I really wasn't in the mood!) I suddenly felt a flood of relief (it really did feel like a wave washing over me!) as I realized that this was exactly what I had "wished" for (asked for? prayed for?) in school the day before! I brought my grade back up, and learned something about the nature of prayer!

3. *Has scripture ever spoken to you in a way that gave specific direction to your life or clarified a decision for you? If so, please discuss this.*

-Tonight (Maundy Thursday) in his sermon at St. Luke's, Evanston, Cotton Fite mentioned All Saint's in LA--a church my daughter has just begun attending and will be at tonight--in his sermon on our invitation to the communion table. At that moment it was as if I was indeed at mass with [my daughter]-and as I mull it over with all the people in all the churches who keep Maundy Thursday.

-Not so much in any specific instance of decision-making, but more in how to behave in general (treatment of other people, trying to put material things and life's daily aggravations, etc. in proper perspective).

-I'm not sure but I try to do "unto others as I would want them to do unto me."

Communal Spiritual Discernment

4. *How are you involved in the major decisions and directions of this church community?*

-I am involved in decisions as a vestry member and pantry director. Always seeking ways to improve our small but very active church community especially with our ministry of clothing and food to our local community.

-Vestry person, help cut costs of church operations.

-As a vestry member and warden, ECW member, and as a member of our last clergy search committee.

-Very

5. *What does this church community do to try to understand God's desire/will in the decisions the parish faces?*

-Nothing formal--yet as individuals we all work with bits and pieces of the questions we face--and when they can be tackled with a work day or fund raiser do not too badly.

-I think we do this only very haphazardly based on various individuals' personal discernments, which then guide our group decisions to some extent. I think a more formal, intentional group discernment process will be a good thing for us.

-Worship, pray and meditate together. And search for ways to improve our effectiveness in this community.

-Try our best to be fair and equal.

6. *Do parishioners ever share a dream, vision, image that stayed with them, or a deep inner knowing that seemed to come from God in prayer or meditation that they felt might help provide some direction for the church's life, sense of mission, or ministry, or help in clarifying something concerning a decision the church faces? If so, please discuss that.*

-Again, mostly informally in small groups (over Sat. AM coffee, at ECW, etc.) Much more of this type of sharing occurred when we had an active adult class as part of coffee hour. We really need to get back to something like that, and I hope we get a priest who is committed to and good at that sort of thing and who will persist in getting us back into the habit!

-None that I'm sure of.

-Yes, that this church continues to survive spiritually and financially.

7. *Has a meditative approach to scripture ever been used to help this church understand God's desire/will for a decision it faced or a policy direction it was considering? If so, what happened?*

-None?

-Not to my knowledge.

New Understandings and Applications

8. *Please share any new or deepened understandings you have gained from the formation program on spiritual discernment.*

-My new thing is taking the (was it Jesuit?) idea of living with a choice to explore its possibilities--esp. when my immediate reaction is no.

-I've gained some new understanding of the "pieces" and methods that go into discernment, which in turn has made me more receptive to the idea of having a more formal model of discernment in place for helping in parish direction-finding and decision-making. I think the program is helping move us on to a stage in our self-examination where we'll be ready to decide our future goals.

-I have learned how to listen more carefully and watch for the signs that give direction or possible solutions to our everyday problems and situations.

-None?

9. *What from the program do you have questions or disagreements about or you would have wanted developed differently?*

-It was OK the way it was.

-None at this time.

-Too soon to tell (for me)--will have a better idea after the next (smaller-group) phase is done and a discernment process is actually implemented in the parish.

-I would like to have spent more time with the various spiritualities--esp. acknowledging the way we at St. C have had almost a Benedictine ethic--esp. when our Saturdays began w/mass and ended with labor (altar, pantry, cleaning).

10. *Would you be available for further training and service in individual or communal spiritual discernment if asked to participate? If so, would you prefer to focus your attention on helping individuals in their discernment questions or helping the church leadership in the questions of the parish's decisions and direction or both?*

-Yes. Both.

-No--none.

-Not at this time.

-Yes. I'd probably be more inclined to focus on parish decision-making. In individual work I might be too likely to go into "bossy teacher" mode and tell people what I think they should do! (Teenagers often ask for that sort of advice, but I don't think most adults want it!)

11. *Do you have any other comments you wish to share about this formation program in spiritual discernment?*

-None.

-No.

-I wished more people had stayed to participate in more of the sessions, because however we decide to implement discernment, it will affect all of us!

Statement of Confidentiality: Every effort will be made to safeguard your identity from public disclosure, that is, beyond the confines of the parish church community. Your name will not be disclosed in any publication or presentation resulting from this survey or any other research or consulting work related to this project unless you give specific written permission related to particular material associated with you. Giving your name to this survey assists in the collection of data and accuracy of record-keeping but does not give permission to disclose your name or associate it with survey contents.

Daniel L. Prechtel 4-8-01

Advanced Training Session Outlines

Advanced Training Session 1 (May 20, 2 hours)

(Initial question: is it all right to record these sessions for research purposes and option to ask that the recorder be turned off at any time?)

Centering and Check-in:

Is there anything you think the group should know?
Any assumptions or expectations we should explore?

Prayerfulness Exercise

Spirituality Wheel and Spiritual Paths/Modes of Prayer

Spiritual Discernment Cycle Application

Where are we on the discernment chart for parish discernment?
What can the group do to further discernment in-between sessions?

Journaling suggestions

Keep a journal or notebook.
Note in it any dreams that involve your discernment subject; and any images, words or phrases, questions, affirmations, or possible directions that emerge from your prayer and meditation about your discernment subject.

Sessions to follow:

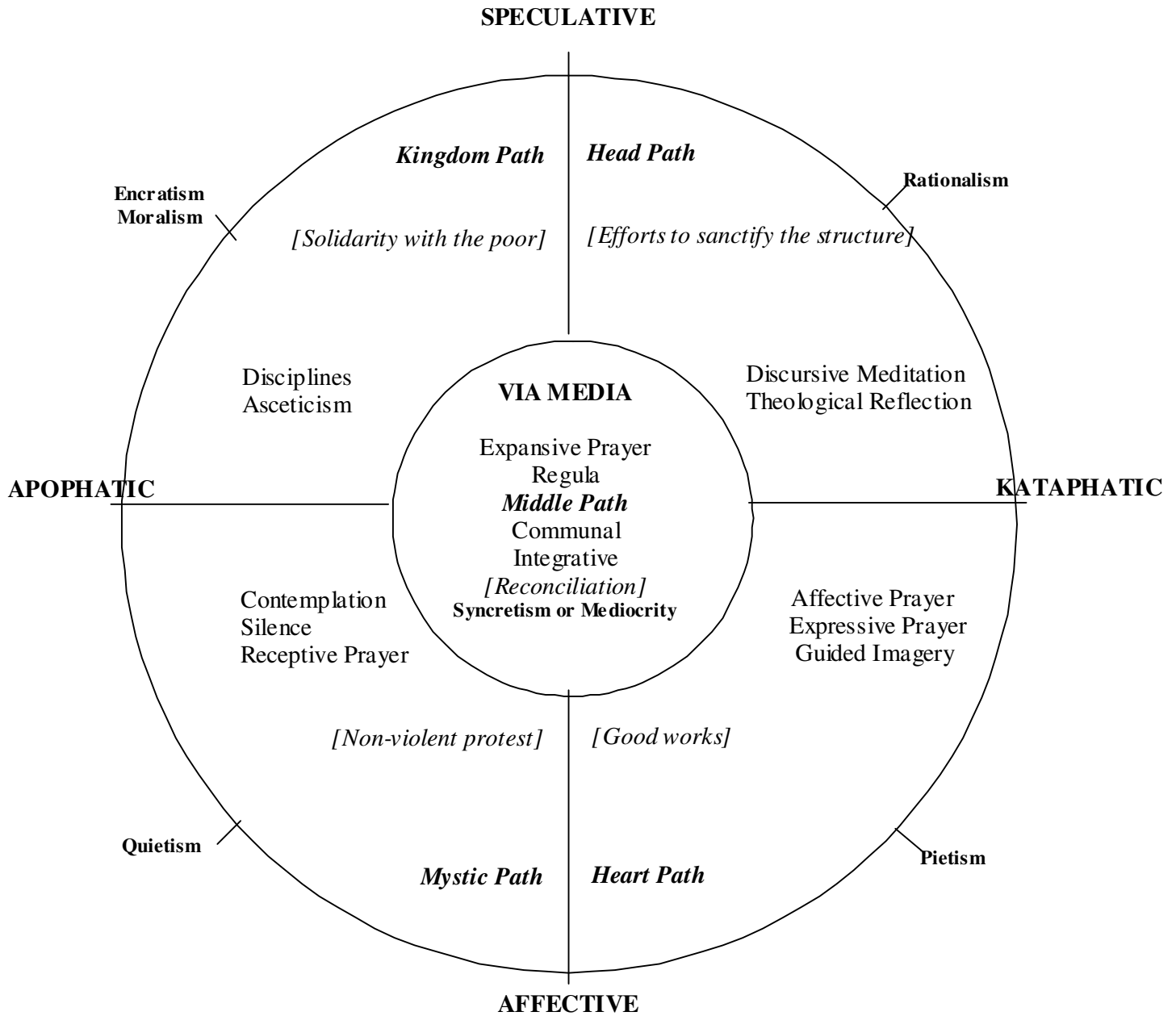
Process Review and Session Closure

From all that occurred in this session, what might be God's invitation to us?

Spiritual Paths and the Landscape of Prayer

(D. Prechtel, 4/00)

Quadrants by Urban T. Holmes, Social components by Rachael Hosmer
 Quadrant path names by Corrine Ware, Via Media component by Dan Prechtel



POLES:	
SPECULATIVE (illumination of mind)	AFFECTIVE (heart/emotions)
APOPHATIC (Negative Way—emptying)	KATAPHATIC (Positive Way—imaginal)
VIA MEDIA (Middle Way—synthesis)	
EXAGGERATIONS:	
Moralism (overemphasize ideals)	Syncretism (underemphasize coherence)
Rationalism (overemphasize reason)	Pietism (overemphasize feelings)
Encratism (overdenial of body)	Quietism (overdenial of world)

Advanced Training Session 2 (June 16, 4 hours)

Centering and Check-in:

Are there any recent developments to share with this group about you or the parish?

Agenda request:

Bridget--we spend some time looking at the summer liturgy.

Other items?

African Bible Study:

(Handouts on “Oral Tradition Method” and “Some scripture passages for meditation”)

Discerning the Spirit of the Community Exercise:

(Handout on “Guided Imagination or Journaling with the Angel/Spirit of the Organization”)

(Force Field Analysis:)

We might postpone this until later?

Spiritual Discernment Application:

What has emerged from journaling and prayer over the past few weeks related to discernment issues for St. Clement’s Church?

What has emerged as considerations for our parish discernment process from today’s meeting?

What can the group do to further discernment in-between sessions?

Next Session:

Sunday, July 8 11:30-2:30 3 hours (St. Clement’s)

Clearness Committee/Listening Hearts or Dreamwork Group Model

Process Review and Session Closure

From all that occurred in this session, what might be God’s invitation to us?

A Simple Group Form of Lectio Divina (Holy Reading)

A short passage of scripture will be read three times during the course of the time together. Whoever is leading the process could provide background commentary on the scripture passage before the first reading. Then the following steps are used:

1. (Before the reading ask people to listen for the word or phrase that catches their attention, and invite people to a short period of preparatory silence.) Ask someone to read the passage slowly.
2. Invite participants to take a minute to recall (and write down if they need to) the word or phrase that caught their attention.
3. Invite each person to share the word or phrase with the group (no more than just the word or phrase). Note: anyone may choose not to make a statement at anytime in this process.
4. Ask someone else to read the passage again (opposite sex of first reader if possible, may use a different translation).
5. Invite participants to think/write about, “Where does this passage touch my life, my church community, our nation, or our world today?”
6. Invite each person to share these: “For me, ...”
7. Ask someone else to read the passage out loud again.
8. Ask participants to think/write about: “From what I have heard and shared, what does God seem to be inviting me (or my church community, etc.) to do or be in these coming days?”
9. Invite each person to share these: “For me, ...”
10. Concluding group reflections and/or prayer from the group members.
11. [If there is a larger group reflection time the small group members may bring their reflections touching on the church community to the large group.]

Daniel Prechtel
rev. 11/01

Some scripture passages for meditation:

Psalm 107.28-32 (Calming the Storm Within)*
Proverbs 8.1-7,14 (Wisdom's Call)*+
Exodus 3.1-5,7-8,10-12 (Burning Bush, Receiving a Mission)* +
Numbers 13.30-33; 14:6-10 (Grasshoppers, Giants)*
Matthew 13.1-9 (Sower)* +
Matthew 13.24-30 (Weeds among Wheat)
Matthew 13.31-33 (Mustard Seed, Yeast)*
Matthew 13.44-52 (Treasure, Pearl, Net, Old and New)*
(Buried Treasure) communal dimension+
Matthew 21.33-43 (Parable of the Marriage Feast)+
John 15.1-12 (Vine, Branches, New Commandment)*
John 20.19-22(23) (Resurrection Appearance, Peace, Breath of the Spirit)+
Luke 24.36-48 (Resurrection Appearance, Peace, Opened Minds)
Matthew 28.16-20 (Resurrection Appearance, Commissioning)
Ephesians 4.1-7,11-15 (One Lord, Faith, Baptism--Gifts to Equip the Saints)
Luke 12.22-31 (Letting Go of Anxiety--God's Providential Care)*
Matthew 5.14-16 (Letting Your Light Shine)*
John 5.1-9 (Toward Healing and Wholeness)*
Matthew 8.23-27 (Calming the Storm, Stilling the Waves)+
Matthew 5.23-24 (Reconciliation)*
John 14.15-21 (God Within You in Unity)+
1 Corinthians 2.12-13a, 16 (We Have the Mind of Christ)+
1 Corinthians 12.1-11 (One Spirit, Many Gifts)
1 Corinthians 12.12-27 (One Body, Many Members)*
Hebrews 12.1-2 (Surrounded by Cloud of Witnesses)+
Acts 13.1-3 (Barnabas & Saul Commissioned by the Spirit and Sent with Laying-On Hands)
Acts 16.6-15 (Paul & Company's Mission Guided by the Spirit)
Revelation 3:20 (Christ at the Door)+

* Meditation available from Carolyn Stahl Bohler, *Opening to God*

+ Meditation available from Daniel Prechtel

Active Imagination or Journaling with the Angel/Spirit of the Church:

Using a journal dialogue method (perhaps having the angel reply to your questions by writing with your non-dominant hand) or by active imagination, or by having someone lead a symbol guidance meditation, imagine the angel (spirit) of the church or other organization. Some things to consider are:

Be open to it appearing to you in any shape or form it chooses.

(It may appear as an animal, a human, a plant, or have another familiar shape and form—but it may present itself in an unfamiliar shape and form.)

Does it have a particular gender?

Notice what color or colors it exhibits. How is it adorned?

Does it have a particular name?

How old does it appear to be?

What does it say its purpose is?

Who or what does it serve?

Who or what is it allied with?

Who or what serves it?

What gives it energy?

What does it say it needs?

How strong, healthy, vital is it?

What are its greatest challenges?

What is it afraid of?

What does it desire?

How does it manifest its power? How does it use its power?

How does it relate to the organization's leadership?

How does it relate to the organization's members? Constituents, if different than members?

What does it do to those who try to change the organization?

Does it identify with a particular biblical phrase, passage, story, or image?

How do you relate to it? (Cognitively and affectively)

What other questions do you have for it or things you would like to explore with it?

D. Prechtel, rev. 12-5-2000

Notes on 6/16 Advanced Group Exploration of “The St. Clement’s Dream”

We were reporting in on what had emerged from journaling or prayer over the past few weeks related to discernment issues for St. Clement’s when Miriam mentioned that she has been having a recurrent dream. She said she didn’t know why she keeps having it but it definitely relates to St. Clement’s. I suggested that since we are working together on spiritual discernment for the parish, “maybe it is not only for you, but it is for us.”

So she told us this dream—

This is the only dream that I have had that has to do with St. Clement’s and I’ve been having it for about five years now. It is my wedding day. St. Clement’s is beautifully decorated.. My limo pulls up. I’m an observer, so I’m watching myself. And I step out with my bridesmaids. When I first started having my dream we all wore black. We processed into the church where I see all the guests dressed in black. Father Brady is at the front, and while he looks sad all the guests who are also dressed in black look happy. Some of them are crying but they have smiles on their faces. My father leads me up to the altar where I notice something black. It is a casket. The groom is standing next to the casket. He opens it and places a white rose inside. When he opens it I catch a glimpse of the man inside. It is a former parishioner. I start to cry. The groom and I take hands and Father Brady begins the ceremony in front of the casket.

Miriam continued her narrative:

I’ve been having this dream for five years now. Each time the dream is almost the same with slight variations. My dress and my bridesmaids dresses are getting lighter each time I have the dream. The last time I had the dream everyone was wearing a kind of peach, which is one of my favorite colors. Usually, now when I have the dream, when I march into the church the casket is almost always open.

In further discussion the man in the casket was identified as Peter and the groom is his son. Miriam says that Peter’s son is a friend of hers but not a romantic figure in real life. “*He is always dressed in white. And he always lays a white rose. And Peter is in white.*” The group speculates that the congregation has not fully dealt with Peter’s death, signifying being dressed in black but they are working on it, signified by the lightening of color over time. The group asked her about the color of the limo and the color of the vestments. *She said that she knew for sure the limo was black when she first started having the dream, but she doesn’t know about the color now. Fr. Brady isn’t wearing vestments, just a black clergy shirt.*

This generated expressions of concern for how some parishioners have dealt with the loss of Peter. The first time she had the dream was about a week after the funeral. She had it more frequently for the first two years. Now she has it about once a month.

I suggested approaching the dream as a picture of the congregation—that wants to have a wedding but is still needing to complete a burial before the wedding can happen. To what degree is this a question of the need of the congregation to do its grieving? Is the dream a measure of the church’s movement toward grief resolution? Others remarked that there is some movement—colors are shifting. Miriam remembers changes over time from brown hues, and eggplant colors, to this “nice light peach.”

Deborah noted that Father Brady left at the same time. She added, “For me, I did not connect the two. I dealt with Peter’s leaving but what I didn’t deal with was Father’s leaving.” Miriam recalls, “*In the dream Father Brady, me, and [Peter’s son] are the only ones who pay attention to the casket. Nobody in the congregation is paying attention to the casket. Everyone in the congregation is happy.*”

I add, “This is interesting. It almost looks like mass denial!”

Deborah said, “An unfortunate part is that we took in an interim that didn’t help matters.”

Bridget: “It wasn’t even neutral. Neutral would have been better.”

Deborah: “I think I’m better today than I was maybe a year ago.”

Bridget: “But you had to do that on your own. There wasn’t anybody helping anybody do it.

Which is partly, I’m sure, why it has dragged on for people as long as it has. People didn’t get what they needed at the time, people didn’t get the support system that they needed to deal with it.”

Hilda adds, “And for me [Fr. Brady] remained a very real presence in my life and a very important one, and then there’s St. Clement’s over here. And sometimes I just have to let that be...He still gets weekly and sometimes daily reports about St. Clement’s and he still cares. And it is deep in him, a very real thing for him, he saw that the way to separate– to let the church go be other than it is and let it grow beyond– is to separate from it completely...To be ready and available for the phone calls that come, but not to try to initiate. To be very careful when St. Clement’s wants to cling to him as the priest. And my personal opinion is that I think he needs to come back. And I don’t think he’s ready, and I’m not sure we are. And I don’t know what the occasion [will be].”

Bridget said, “Maybe it’s one of those things where when it’s the right time everybody will know it. You don’t force it. You just wait.”

They shared a reminiscence about when Fr. Brady came to church one Sunday about a year after he had retired and how good it was to see him. Deborah said that when she saw him all the resentments she had built up just went “poof.”

I observed, “There’s been a lot of energy here related to grief and it’s important to remember this. Perhaps a guiding symbol for us in this is to say what might be some of the needs of this community? To say there is movement on this, but it has been slow. (Group started nodding agreement and saying “Um Hmm.”) There has been a kind of obliviousness on some level about ‘the death’ and grieving issues and yet they are there. It isn’t yet fitting the picture of the ‘the wedding’ – of the real festival– although the excitement is anticipating that but there’s still yet a burial that needs to happen, there’s still yet a sad rector that needs to be dealt with.”

After some story-telling about Peter and Fr. Brady we concluded the session with the question for the community of how do we hold lightly but with respect the people of the past (like the Peters and Fr. Bradys) in their fulness as gift? Not clinging tightly, but not forgetting the past in its rich positive and negative sides. How might that influence the shape of the future?

Following the meeting Hilda asked if we wished to go to the beach and have a hot dog. She said that if it was all right with everyone she could give Fr. Brady a call and tell him we are going to the hot dog stand. On the way to the beach we continued to discuss “the Dream.” There was strong interest in sharing it with the parish but Miriam was concerned about Phoebe, afraid that it would reopen her pain and hurt her feelings. We were not sure what to do, and so we chose to wait for further clarity. It was a lovely afternoon and we took our time sitting by the lakeshore, eating hot dogs, and briefly met Fr. Brady (who I had not met before) who appeared happy to see us.

Advanced Training Session 3 (July 8, 3 hours)

Centering and Check-in:

Are there any recent developments to share with this group about you or the parish?

Tim Hall's request.

Any feedback on the "Guided Imagination or Journaling with the Angel/Spirit of the Organization" exercise?

Agenda request:

We spend some time looking at the summer liturgy?

Other items?

Clearness Committee/Listening Hearts Model:

Spiritual Discernment Application:

What has emerged from journaling and prayer over the past few weeks related to discernment issues for St. Clement's Church?

What has emerged as considerations for our parish discernment process from today's meeting?

What can the group do to further discernment in-between sessions?

Next Session:

Saturday, August 18 9:00-12:00 3 hours(St. Clement's)

Guided imagery with scripture; contemplative prayer with scripture or question

Establish the 6-hour mentoring process

Process Review and Session Closure

From all that occurred in this session, what might be God's invitation to us?

Advanced Training Session 4 (August 18, 3hours)

Centering and Check-in:

Are there any recent developments to share with this group about you or the parish?

What has emerged from journaling and prayer over the past few weeks related to discernment issues for St. Clement's Church?

Agenda request:

Guided Scripture Meditation: Resurrection Appearance to the Disciples

(patterned from John 20.19-22 or Luke 24.36b-40,44-49)

Contemplative Prayer with a Question:

Spiritual Discernment Application:

What has emerged as considerations for your parish discernment process from today's meeting?

Planning an ongoing Discernment Advisory Group at St. Clement's:

Role of Daniel shifts from trainer to mentor for Advisory Group & Vestry

(final six contact hours of project contract)

Process Review and Session Closure

From all that occurred in this session, what might be God's invitation to us?

A WINDOW FOR GROUP SPIRITUAL SELF-AWARENESS

	GROUP KNOWS ABOUT ITSELF	GROUP DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT ITSELF
OTHERS KNOW ABOUT GROUP	<p><u><i>Openness to Public Disclosure</i></u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mission/Purpose Statement • Descriptions of “what we do” • Invitations for sessions open to guests and visitors • Varying levels of trust and intimacy needs • External service to others • Degree of “open” stance 	<p><u><i>The Blind Side/Shadow</i></u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group projections • Unexplored assumptions • Implicit group myths • Unrecognized gifts • Unconscious resistance tactics; such as dependency, fight/flight, pairing • Help from outsiders, such as facilitator, consultant, spiritual director to the group can increase group’s ability to become aware of group dynamics, gifts, wounds in need of healing
OTHERS DON'T KNOW ABOUT GROUP	<p><u><i>The Hidden Identity</i></u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Ingroup-Outgroup” • Initiatory stages • Insider’s information • Needs for confidentiality • Degree of “closed” stance • Shamed activity or traumas from past needing healing • Occult or cult-type environment • Help from outsiders such as facilitator, consultant, spiritual director to group can help with group healing and appropriate levels of disclosure to others 	<p><u><i>Realm of Mystery</i></u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mystery of the group’s collective unconscious known only to God • Often requires competent guides to help probe these depths revealed in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ dream symbols on communal level of meaning ◦ guided imagery meditations ◦ family & cultural roots ◦ discerning the spirit of the group • Rituals, sacraments, and symbols can speak to this dimension • Communal spiritual discernment practices may disclose God’s desire

Some material adapted from Katherine Dyckman & Patrick Carroll’s *Inviting the Mystic, Supporting the Prophet*.

Daniel Prechtel, 5/01

Resurrection Appearance to the Disciples

(patterned from John 20.19-22 or Luke 24.36b-40,44-49)

(The meditation should allow frequent pauses for people to visualize or “think through” different scenes. Ask the group to focus particularly on how Christ might engage us as a Christian community rather than as individuals.)

Imagine your congregation (or church leaders) gathered together in a particular place [for a meeting to try to decide an important question—what is that question?].

Imagine the resurrected Christ appearing in the midst of the gathering. What does the Christ look like? How do you feel about Christ’s presence? What about others in your church? Is anyone saying anything or doing anything in response to Christ’s appearing?

Are there things that your church community is afraid of or concerned about or seeks direction about that needs to be brought to Christ? What does Christ say or do about your fears or concerns or request for direction?

Christ offers you peace. What is that like for you and the rest of the community?

Christ empowers your community to a mission beyond yourselves.

What might that be? What does it feel like to receive the power of the Spirit? What gifts or abilities seem to emerge for your community’s empowerment? Are you aware of resistance or confusion or other barriers to receiving this empowerment? If so, you can ask Christ for guidance.

You might ask the Christ for a word or phrase or gift that speaks to the nature of your community at this time.

Receive whatever Christ has to give you on behalf of your community.

Ask whatever questions you need to for understanding this word, phrase or gift.

The time has come for you to say goodbye and return from the meditation with your memories of this encounter. Make your goodbyes in any way that feels appropriate.

Daniel Prechtel

8-17-01

Parish Closing Celebration and Reflection Process, 12-16-01

Form chairs in a large circle (or remain in small table groups?).

Arrange for a recorder of the meeting and someone to attend the tape recorder.

Go over the purpose of this gathering:

- celebration of work together.
- share what has been particularly helpful for personal and/or community discernment and what might have been more helpful if done differently.
- have you seen changes in the parish community as a result of this effort?
- what might be next steps that God is inviting you individually or as a parish community to take?

Acknowledgments:

- Thanks to vestry and wardens for making this program available to everyone.
- Virtually everyone here has participated in some dimension of this program, because of several guided imagery meditations that were led as sermons at Eucharists and with coffee hour presentations. We also did significant work together as a parish in discussions of the parish history and community gifts and concerns prior to this program in discernment.
- Twenty-one parishioners took the time to participate in at least one of the five sessions and nearly 8 hours of general training in individual and community spiritual discernment.
- Following this general training, six people took 12 hours over 4 sessions of advanced training in spiritual discernment and have become resource people for you in individual and communal discernment matters.

[Identify the parish discernment advisory group members.]

Present them with singing bowl on behalf of the parish.

Guided Imagery Meditation: Christ at the Door

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)

(Begin with singing bowl) ...Christ knocks on the door of the church. You go and let Christ in, and bring Christ to this gathering. Christ asks you what has been most meaningful to you about the parish focus on spiritual discernment. Discuss with Christ your experience of seeking his mind and guidance...Have there been exercises or presentations that opened up new avenues to Christ for you personally? ...As a community together? ...Were there things that you found confusing or you were concerned about? Tell Christ whatever is on your heart and mind. And listen for Christ's response... Perhaps Christ has something to say to you, or something to show you, or give to you. Receive whatever Christ has for you. You might ask Christ if there is any word or symbol of guidance that you can bring to this church. Listen or think about what Christ has for the people of St. Clement's as guidance in their next steps... Invite Christ to stay here with this church...to be in our hearts and minds... And whenever you are ready, begin shifting from your inner imagination to your awareness of our outer gathering here...(singing bowl)

Sharing:

1. What has been particularly important and how has it affected or changed you and the church?
How does this affect the way major decisions are approached and made?

2. What might be next steps that God is inviting you as a church or individually to take, and what might be needed in order to do that? Any symbols, images, or words connected with that invitation?
3. What would you recommend for me in further developing my work with churches? What might have been more helpful if done differently?

Reminder that I will be available for individual or small group conversation over the next two Sundays as well as by telephone or email. I also have copies of the review questions available if you want to write more in response to them and give your responses to me today or on the next two Sundays.

This program has also been the thesis project for my doctor of ministry work at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary and I hope to share the results of this with St. Clement's at a future date.

Closing the gathering

Responses to Questions for Review and Reflection on the Spiritual Discernment Program

1. *What has been particularly important for you in this program about seeking God's guidance and direction? How has it affected or changed you and the church? How does this affect the way major decisions are made?*

[Irene]: As a group we have a purpose/mission. Commitment has increased. We know that what we must do is here.

[Parishioner 1]: Increased closeness to God. We have better understanding and able to see signs about directions we should take.

[Parishioner 1]: The learned process of prayer. His way of reaching me. The signs of God's presence in my life. And how he has reached our church.*

[Bridget]: We have more awareness of discernment as something to pursue actively. We have changed our focus to what it is we're supposed to do and what we need to do it from what do we have to do to survive.

[Bridget]: I think the 2 major benefits have been 1) teaching us specific discernment techniques which are new to us and 2) to shift our focus from the past to the future. I think we are now able to learn from past problems without wallowing in them and make decisions based on where God wants us to go next.*

[Deborah]: Opened to accept change without being obstinate about it. We're ready to accept things about the church we'd not been ready to accept before.

[Mark]: Understand your abilities and concentrate them. If one has a talent (even one he doesn't like), it should be used. For example, [Mark's] work with children.

[Thomas]: Not having a priest relieved us of that financial responsibility for the year and now the bills are paid. Financial responsibility is an important part of running a church. Things have worked better without a priest. More relaxed.

2. *What might be next steps that God is inviting you as a church and individually to take, and what might be needed in order to do that? Any symbols, images, or words connected with that invitation?*

[Mark]: We know we can do what we want to. The path is open. Challenge is which path to take. No longer using the word, can't. We have collective unity.

[Irene]: I'm not as fearful of losing something I cherish in this church (e.g. the music) if we bring in a new priest. Now see that we must share what we have with others in the community and that may mean change. We should preserve and defend what we have in order to share it with others.

[Bridget]: We're starting to behave as a group based on what we think we're supposed to do rather than on a business model. If this is what you're supposed to do it will happen. Get over old hangs ups and move on.

[Bridget]: I think we really are approaching the point of seriously looking for suitable clergy and “getting on with it”! We need to keep using our discernment techniques during that process until they become second nature to all in the parish and a part of how we function from now on. Words/images? “Letting go, moving on.”*

[Parishioner 1]: If we bless God, we will be rewarded in ways that are both tangible and intangible. God is acting through people. God gives you things you don't ask for.

[Parishioner 1]: to continue to understand his love and grace. The words that are connected for me is Joy.*

3. *What would you recommend for me in further developing my work with churches? What might have been more helpful if done differently?*

[Unidentified]: This kind of work takes patience. Guided imagery and dream work were particularly valuable -- both for those who shared dreams and those never remember their own dreams but gained insights from those of others. The most fruitful time was that spent practicing specific techniques.

[Bridget]: I think with our particular group the specific discernment techniques are the most effective part--more than the general theory aspect of it. I'd like to have us teach more of those techniques to all members (we've begun--a little).*

* These comments were turned in several weeks later in written form.

Parish Discernment Advisory Group

Suggested Meeting Format

Gathering prayer

Check-in

Personal sharing about your life, discernment questions, God's invitations?

Parish community developments, discernment questions, God's invitations?

For Attention Today

(Things members would like some time to address at the meeting)

Prayerfulness exercise

(A member is prepared ahead of time to lead the group in some exercise related to spiritual discernment)

Application

What has emerged as considerations for our parish's discernment process from today's meeting?

What can the group do to further spiritual discernment in-between sessions for individuals or for the parish as a whole?

Planning for next meeting

When is our next meeting?

Who will facilitate the meeting?

What discernment/prayerfulness exercise might help us?

Who will prepare to lead the prayerfulness exercise?

Closing Prayer

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