



**communal
discernment**

Election and Communal Discernment: Goals, Myths, and Gifts

For fifteen years my wife, Beth Lipsmeyer, and I have, as facilitators, been privileged to accompany many communities through communal discernment leading to the election of leadership teams. We have discovered that there are not only wide-ranging views on what communal discernment is, but also varied expectations regarding what it will achieve. In other words, beyond the election, what does communal discernment offer communities and what does the “communal” part mean? On this topic there are *myths*, commonly held beliefs that no longer apply. In addition, while increasing numbers of communities are using communal discernment, many of them focus so much on the outcome (the election) that they fail to see the gifts they are receiving along the way.

I offer here some reflections on what I consider the worthwhile *goals*, common *myths*, and

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subtle *gifts* of communal discernment. There is, of course, no one right way to understand communal discernment; every community defines its own objectives and ways of using it. With this article I invite your reflections. I hope communities will dialogue among themselves about how to get the most from the communal discernment they use in their elections.

Goals of Discernment

Like flipping a coin or agreeing that the majority rules, discernment is, after all is said and done, just another way to make decisions. Unlike flipping a coin, however, there is nothing random or quick about it. Discernment is intentional and requires a great deal of time if it is to be done well. Unlike a simple democratic vote, in discernment it is the Spirit, not the majority, that rules. In communal discernment it is deepening partnership, rather than well-conducted campaigning, that ensures integrity and brings persuasion.

The communal discernment we are discussing seeks the election of the best leaders. It is, however, about more than just choosing leaders. Another goal is to engage you in the drama of a deeper story, your collective story, as it continues to unfold. In communal discernment, bonds of partnership are formed and re-formed, woven together with your charism and your traditions and with questions of who you are called to become. Communal discernment offers all members the opportunity to influence how your leadership should function, to shape the team's values and style of working. A third goal of communal discernment is to shape the nature of the partnership between elected leadership and membership. I would like to elaborate on this, for it appears central to the yearning of many communities.

Communal discernment can create new ways for leadership and membership to be together. This includes

sharing the same vision. To do this, to have the same vision living inside each member, they all must have some degree of ownership of it. Looking toward the future, they must, as partners, share in some detail how they envision it and what they hope to contribute to it. Communal discernment invites this kind of heartfelt talking and listening, such fostering of shared hope.

Communities yearn to be able to share one another's gifts more fully, to affirm one another more fully, to feel more deeply the possibilities and power inherent in their being together in one community, no matter what their individual positions or ministries. Communities appear to be struggling for a deeper kind of partnership laced together by their personal commitments to, and their emotional investment in, their collective future. They want to become freer by having greater personal responsibility.

This kind of partnership does not just happen. It may be a promise of faith, but it is formed by experience, tested by challenges, and re-formed through expressions of care, the anguish of confrontation, and the hard work of reconciliation. In communal discernment, opportunities abound to shape the partnerships you aspire to achieve. Communal discernment enables you to reflect, both personally and collectively, upon where your community seems to be heading, what your vision of the future is, what your communal needs are, and what individual and collective gifts you possess to work with. Ideally, communal discernment will affirm and assist each and every one of you in your search for clarity and wisdom as you *together* appreciate your collective truth through a new kind of partnership.

Thus, along with (1) choosing your leadership, communal discernment also enables your communities (2) to discover the values and style of leadership you want for yourselves and (3) to build the kind of partnership

between elected leadership and membership that will enhance your preferred future.

Myths of Discernment

What follows are seven myths that I commonly hear expressed in our work across communities. While I have my opinions about these myths, I do not have definitive “answers” about them. My purpose in mentioning these, however, is to evoke conversation among you about what you believe. Eliciting your own understanding of your attitudes and belief about these seven so-called myths may help you to appreciate the terrain through which you will make your way during any future communal discernment efforts.

Myth 1: Discernment is primarily between me and my God. Traditionally this has been true. Discernment has traditionally emphasized one’s deeply personal and prayerful search for God’s will. In recent years, however, communities have developed and emphasized the interplay of personal and communal prayer. Beyond individual prayer, communities are stretching the boundaries of personal discernment to include conversations as a way to hear what the Spirit is saying.

In communal discernment, open dialogue pools the wisdom of your personal efforts so that together you can discover God’s intentions. Personal and communal prayer, personal and shared reflection and dialogue, are increasingly the norm for the discernment used in elections. Discernment is no longer just a private matter between you and your God. It is between you and your God, but also with and among all your fellow members bringing *their* God-given inspirations and longings and wisdom.

Myth 2: Leaders are elected to represent what I want and believe. In a democracy, leaders are elected to “represent” their constituency. People cast their votes for the

candidates they believe will best represent them and speak up for their interests. These politicians are elected, in part, as conduits for the voices of their constituents.

In discernment the emphasis is on the process, not on the outcome, the election itself. In fact, in the process

there must be "detachment" from the outcome. This is necessary for people to hear what God may be asking, to hear the truth as it unfolds. Detachment from the outcome is meant to aid in listening honestly to what is really being revealed rather than to what you already know, or expect to hear, or want or do not want to hear. In other words, if what someone tells you, or asks you to look at, seems to assail the out-

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come you prefer, you might stop your ears from hearing it. Setting aside your preferred outcome helps you to listen more honestly.

If communal discernment has been done carefully, the subsequent voting expresses the wisdom of an enlightened group, not contentious efforts to put one's own candidate into the office. The power of individuals to enlighten, to forge partnerships, to stir vision, to cooperate in one another's future, is not limited to voting. Your community's power in discernment is limited only by your difficulties in listening, your inhibitions about speaking, or your complicated efforts to get others to speak for you. Discernment invites all of you to give full voice to your most authentic truth. In a discerned election, voting is only one of many opportunities (perhaps the least influential of all) to have your voice heard. Leaders called forth in this way are not so much elected to represent what you believe and to speak

for you, but rather are affirmed to partner with all members in forwarding the movement of your community's mission.

Myth 3: Discernment is primarily for those who are endorsed. From my perspective, and in our preferred approach to facilitating, communal discernment involves everyone in the community from beginning to end, not just those endorsed. Everyone goes through each phase of communal discernment, and everyone is invited to participate in processes along the way. Individual and communal prayer takes place throughout. Individual and shared reflections take place throughout. The interplay between personal and communal discernment is a dance that begins with the preparations for endorsements and concludes with the election. While sometimes separate and sometimes together, all members (not just those endorsed) are engaged in discernment, and any process that is done separately needs to reconnect with the whole so that there truly is a communal discernment.

Our approach to communal discernment encourages the pooling of wisdom from past leadership and from those endorsed, from supportive, collaborative, and deliberative members. Everyone is invited to submit endorsements, and these are the basis of invitations to the first discernment gathering, such as a discernment weekend. Those who attend come with the wider community's blessings, input, prayers, and concerns, including expressions of desires and critical issues. Afterwards these persons bring to the community, at the "discernment assembly," their presumed group enlightenment. They share what they have found helpful and pertinent, and in turn they listen carefully to the wider community's wisdom—so that all have a better basis for their continuing discernment.

No matter how many phases or gatherings there are, the emphasis in communal discernment is to bring

together into unity the fruits of every individual or group discernment. Open dialogue, sharing discoveries along the way, and making decisions (such as to withdraw from the process) only in the context of the whole—all of these bolster trust in the overall discernment and in one another.

Myth 4: Those with fewer endorsements are not serious contenders. Those with one, five, or fifty endorsements are of equal voice and value to the communal discernment. Each person endorsed, regardless of numbers, has been validly called. All are asked to consider themselves potential leaders and to discern with the Holy Spirit and the community. The Spirit is present to all, whether endorsed or not, and not more or less present according to the number of endorsements.

It is a mistake to think of endorsements as a straw vote or, worse yet, as a reflection of the number of friends you have that believe in you. Endorsements are signs that people believe that you may have the qualities needed at this time in this leadership position. Numbers are not as important as what the endorsements invite you to explore. Those with the most endorsements may not be elected, and those with one endorsement could be. We facilitated an election wherein a sister with *one* endorsement was ultimately elected after discernment had its deep effect on both her and the community. Endorsements are a departure point for conversation, an invitation to dialogue, and not a straw vote or a test of popularity. Do not expect *numbers* to satisfy your discernment questions, about either your faith or your future.

Myth 5: Discernment means logically weighing pros and cons. Discernment, at its heart, is about searching for what God intends. While reason and logic are important, they are not of preeminent value. In discernment the irrational is not irreverent. Irrational processes of

cognition, such as our intuitions and our hearts' desires, are very much part of what leads us to God. We are made of head and heart, body and soul, mind and spirit. All of these are real. All are valid. Perhaps we can learn and appreciate better what God intends by allowing ourselves to be more fully ourselves, to embrace our humanness in all its dimensions.

That reason and our intuition, or logic and our feelings, may sometimes conflict is not itself a problem. Nor are we called to ignore one in favor of the other. Each of these different kinds of information needs to be understood in its own right. The invitation here is for deeper integration, not muting one in favor of another. What you think is right may conflict with how you feel. What you know may conflict with what you intuit. What you should do may conflict with what you want to do. Conflicting emotions and reasoning and intuitions are signs that your discernment is not as complete as it could be.

The journey of faith often invites us to explore possibilities beyond the boundaries of what reason and logic would dictate. Discernment is, in its essence, a faith journey, and, because there is a communal dimension to this, you are invited to make this journey with one another. Pros and cons are important to look at, and so is spiritual growth. Filtering the qualities needed for leadership is important, and so are opportunities for reconciliation. Assessing your future needs is important, and so too is the struggle to reinvest in community when your past wounds would urge you otherwise. Reason is important, and so is grace.

Myth 6: The election is where my voice really matters.
Some may think that all this discernment talk is nice,

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but in the end "I'll get my vote, and that's all that counts anyway." This is perhaps the biggest myth of all. In years past, when some were chosen to be delegates at chapters or senates, votes were the ultimate expression of the voices that mattered. If you were not chosen, your delegates carried your voice. If you were a delegate, your voice, expressed through voting, had the same weight as that of other delegates. Your vote expressed not only your own desire, but also spoke for those members not in attendance. The delegates were often seen as privileged, and indeed they were, for only their voice was the one counted in the end. Whether through Robert's Rules or other rules, the voices heard at the time of election were confined to carefully laid-out rules of procedure. Votes equaled voice, and this voice was the power of a privileged few.

Most communities have moved to open chapters or senates, where all of you are invited to choose your own mode of participation (supportive, collaborative, deliberative). Everyone is offered the privilege of voting and, more important, the privilege of discernment. Your ability to affect the shaping of your future, and to determine the leaders to help you do so, is entirely dependent upon your personal choosing. You can be of little influence if you choose minimal participation or have a great deal of influence if you involve yourself more deeply. Your voice matters at every step of the discernment, not just during the few hours you spend casting ballots. Your votes will be counted in the end, but, during the months that precede the voting, it is your discerning voices that count the most. In communal discernment the ones who shape the ultimate outcome are the ones who dialogue along the way, who listen and share, who invest in this faith journey and in one another.

Myth 7: Discernment is mainly about choosing the most qualified. From our perspective, focusing upon the most

qualified is as flawed an approach to discernment as its countercorollary, that you should elect only those persons who see eye-to-eye and can get along well. I believe that it is important for team members to have differences and be able to work with them, that process is as important as outcome, that tasks are as important as relationships, and that the ability to work as a team is as important as any team's constellation of gifts and talents. You could elect the best and brightest, but, if they cannot get along, if they cannot gel into a cohesive working unit, you will not see the best of what they have to offer. Likewise, if you elect those that get along without regard for the differing gifts and talents needed, you will not get a leadership adequate to your needs.

From our experience of working with a variety of teams, the composite of its members' talent is effective only to the degree that the "team" functions as a team. In other words, the talent will have its desired proper effect only if there is also a commitment to stay in the struggle: not give up on one another or the tasks at hand, deal with conflict rather than avoid it, work through differences honestly and directly, do the hard work of repairing trust when it is broken (mend wounds and clarify misunderstandings), speak out of principle and compassion, and so on.

Discernment can assist communities in electing individuals who have the flair and the desire or willingness to work as team members, but teams are not elected. Rather, the individuals elected form themselves into a team. It is, however, incumbent upon those electing to look at more than the composite of talents, at more than the résumés. How homogeneous or different the team members are in their styles, beliefs, and abilities is important only insofar as the composite captures what you have collectively claimed is important. No one person has all of these gifts, but as a whole the team you elect

should resemble what the community has discerned to be necessary both in mixture of talents and in preferred style of working together.

Gifts of Discernment:

Wisdom, Relationship, and Light

At any given time some of you can see farther and better than others. Some of you are around the curve and up the hill before others. At another time someone else may have the greater vantage point and see what is on or over the horizon. On journeys everyone has a unique perspective to offer. Some can see what has been, others can see what is, and still others can see what is probably ahead. All of you play a part in understanding and discerning the collective truth.

One sign of a discerning group is that it allows for its communal "truth" to be born from the womb of the whole. The truth that radiates from everyone, if shared by all through open dialogue in the Spirit, can become a wisdom that is beyond the sum of all the contributions. When imbued with the Spirit, communal discernment can transcend individual wisdom and thereby bring a deeper understanding of God's intentions.

I would like to offer a quotation (source unknown) that expresses what I consider the heart of communal discernment: "I sought my God and God abandoned me; I sought my soul and it eluded me; I sought my brother and sister—and found all three." This is very much the essence of discernment. It is a spiritual group pilgrimage inspired by our strong human desire for relationship and our search for love and understanding. It is personal, but it is also spiritual and relational. Communal discernment involves private *and* shared prayer, private *and* shared reflection, private *and* shared understandings of how the Spirit is experienced within each of you and among all of you. You choose this journey in search of

God's will in order to decide personal *and* shared directions. You commit yourselves to this soul-searching, truth-telling pilgrimage out of your yearning to be closer to God and one another.

Communal discernment is, without question, an invitation to walk intimately with one another. Communal discernment is not a side-by-side experience wherein you share fruit that you found by yourself in prayer. It is an ever deepening conversation about your faith and your experience of one another along the way. You are invited to share not only good things you have found, but also your labor: you are to share in giving birth. It is an awesome invitation to meet God in another human being and to discover who that stranger is on the road to Emmaus.

We human beings often seek God when we are disturbed, when we are displaced from our comfort zone of the known, the familiar, and the safe. It is because of our poverty, our powerlessness, because of becoming aware of our fractured selves, that we seek the healing, understanding presence of God and one another. The gift of our disturbance is that our passions are unearthed, the status quo is challenged, and what we have always known is no longer enough. We yearn for, and are frightened by, God's invitation to enter the mystery of our humanness. Yet our faith tells us that new life is found here, in the struggle, in this privileged place where Jesus lives. This place, where we meet Jesus in one another, is a profound gift of discernment.

Communal discernment also offers the gift of light. It challenges you to recognize how you can fool yourself

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in order to get what you want and camouflage it as being "of God." It challenges you to catch how you hide from yourself and eclipse a deeper truth. This is where you are invited to reckon with your hidden payoffs for keeping your own goodness under wraps. This is where you can ask yourselves questions like "What does grace enable me to be?" and "What on earth is holding me back from claiming this?" This is where your loyalties to the way things have always been, to the relationships that have given you life, come face-to-face with your fidelity to the truth you keep getting more awareness of. This is where current realities insist upon new wineskins and new patterns of being and relating. This is where your growing edges encroach upon the status quo of relationships, causing you to look anew at what you have hidden from one another and kept from the people you love.

Discernment is an attitude of listening, listening to the intimate whispers of God through prayer and through your conversations. It is a quiet process of attuning yourself to God's voice, giving special attention to urgings toward new life. Listen for the yes that radiates from within. Listen to fugitive truths, and do not turn away from newborn insights, so that all of you together manage to hear and see more truth. Listen to everyone as if you are listening for the first time, without conjuring up the cries of your old wounds or letting the white noise of a hundred thumbnail reputations blur your attentiveness. Listen to God's urgings toward a future just beyond your grasp, but reachable if you let go and give yourself to it.

The paradox of discernment is that once you have adapted and become adjusted, once you have privately prayed, sifted, and sorted, you must again "let go" and be influenced by the Spirit working within and among you. You must be willing to take in new information, feel new

feelings, and again be influenced by one another. You must seek the gift of interior freedom, of spiritual indifference, as to the outcome. Ideally, you will find a way to hold all personal agendas and desires, all hopes and wishes, all values and passions, in an attitude of openness. Ideally, you will experience being deeply rooted yet holding on to things lightly. In this kind of freedom, God's intentions and those of all of you are together. This is neither blind obedience nor stern self-denial. Rather, it is a transcending of self with eyes wide open as together you follow, or keep trying to follow, God's lead on this journey of faith. God is ceaselessly inviting us into the mystery of *relationships*, the mystery of our *humanness*, the mystery of our life in *Christ*.

Late August

*Blooms are burning themselves out
in backyard gardens.
During evening's lengthening gloom
the whirring chant of locusts
ebbs and rises.
Musk of squash and pumpkin
now replaces headier scents
of May and June.*

*You too are seasoned,
pausing between ripeness
and the threadbare husks of winter.
But within you
the blueflame of chicory
along country roads
burns like a votive candle
before the God of harvests.*

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