

Communal Discernment: Choosing with God in Community

By Steven Wirth

We as Christians seek to grow closer in relationship with God. A challenge in doing this is how to make our life choices better reflect God's values. In the early stages of our spiritual lives this may seem a rather simple and clear-cut practice. As individuals, seeking to do good and avoid evil can carry us a long way. For some people this simple focus remains profound and spiritually rich. Perhaps the circumstances of their lives are such that they face few complex questions.

The rest of us find ourselves confronted with challenging decisions that don't lend themselves easily to simple solutions. This is particularly true when we attempt to live our community and organizational lives mindful of God's values. In relationships as close as that between spouses or as complex as global organizations, the challenge of making decisions and acting in ways consistent with the Spirit requires of us a mature spirit and willing heart.

Yet if a prayerful disposition and a willing heart were adequate to the task of choosing with God's values, one would expect to see a history of far less waywardness in our Christian tradition. The bloody and horrid history of wars, religious persecution, congregational fractures from the local to the universal church were all perpetrated to a large degree by Christians who confidently believed that "God is on our side!" or "We must fight for the Truth!" And even today, when we read the interchanges within denominations as diverse as Southern Baptists, Roman Catholics, Amish, and Presbyterians we notice that regardless of specific issues the pattern of "fighting for the Truth" to the death of the congregation continues.

What is especially interesting about this pattern of divisiveness is that even within groups that are seemingly homogeneous the same patterns tend to play out. We would expect this where the values are widely divergent, say between feminists and traditionalists, but it regularly occurs in settings where the differences to the outside observer are so miniscule as to be beyond understanding. Members of Bible-believing storefront churches can and do regularly split with fury over apparently small changes in the order of service or who the music minister is, with no doctrinal or cultural "truths" at issue.

Granted one answer is that this all results from our sinful human nature. And any casual reader of Christian history recognizes that those with the "purest and most righteous" piety often acted with the greatest fury and inhumanity to others. And although the disparity between the "ends" we claim (doing God's will) and the "means" we use (in some cases torturing and slaughtering whole populations) appear obvious to us in hindsight, we nonetheless know the warrior fury that can get touched in us over those "truths" and issues you and I care passionately about.

I have wrestled with this state of affairs for over 15 years in my work assisting individuals and communities seek God in their organizational, family, and personal lives. As a Christian seeking to follow God in my own life, I know personally the

challenges, pain and profound hope that faithful exploration of these questions can make possible. The need to do so is compelling.

The fractures in our world are large, real, and affect every one of us. The pain they create in all our lives is immeasurable, and each of God's children suffers the results of our inability to resolve our misunderstandings more effectively.

Too many good and faithful Christians despair of the possibility of the Spirit bringing compassion and real unity to the lives of our organizations. How many of us in our heart of hearts trust that god is able to care for the soul of the individual and the spirit of the organization? Honestly? And yet it doesn't have to be this way! For surely God's desire is something richer than the divisive patterns we know too well.

I have witnessed leaders and communities finding common ground despite long-term conflict and apparently differing interests. I have experienced real trust being built in groups where it had not existed before. God's spirit is far more ingenious and effective than our experiences of human community lead us to believe. The possibilities for change are neither magical nor overnight, but they are real and possible.

Drawing on the wisdom of our spiritual traditions and combining this with the skills and practices of contemporary learning organizations allows our communities to draw on a common spirit that is rooted in neither a false peace nor the rigid dominance of a particular viewpoint. Community members describe being able to be their best selves and to work respectfully with those whose values and beliefs are different. They also speak of doing so with a deep sense of integrity to their own highest values and beliefs.

Given the limits of this space, I will attempt in brief fashion to point you toward some immediately useful tools and means of awareness. The necessary starting point is contemplative awareness. At its simplest, contemplation is the natural human ability to "take a long, loving look at the real." Yet while it sounds simple, it is a quality of awareness that we do not recognize or value highly in the busy culture of the United States. Our awareness tends to remain in familiar patterns of looking at experience that lull us into a life of always reacting. Like fish in water, we are surrounded and invisibly carried by our mental theories and patterns of noticing, often without recognizing their presence and power. As long as they remain outside our awareness, we are their prisoner. Contemplative noticing creates space within us and a quality of openness that allows us to see with new eyes what's "real." Like the blind man in Mark 8:22-26, our vision slowly clears and what looked like "trees walking" becomes recognizable as "people."

For concrete examples of tools that help us notice more of what's real in our organizational lives, begin with Barry Johnson's "Polarity Management."¹ The power of this tool lies in its recognition that we are oriented toward "fixing and solving problems," but that some situations we face are dynamic and teeter between related, but very different, values. Think of breathing for a moment. It's a process that necessarily

¹ See www.polaritymanagement.com.

involves both inhaling and exhaling. To focus on inhaling as “the solution” or “the goal” would be an impossible state to maintain. Yet we often treat the tension between “polar values” (for example, tradition and change) as problems that will be solved by holding on to one value or the other in isolation. What polarity management recognizes is that there are seeds of truth in each position that escape our instinctive “right/wrong” and “black/white” dualistic thinking. Moving beyond “I’m right – you’re wrong,” to thoughtful conversations about what qualities of both positions are beneficial allows us to broaden the responses available to our organizations. It gives us a productive way to move beyond the endless debates and parliamentary fights that dog our governing bodies.

A second tool with immense power is Chris Argyris’ “Ladders of Inference.”² The ladder of inference (assumption) refers to the way our brains process experience. Starting with simple sensory data the human mind quickly adds interpretations, analysis, and arrives at abstract judgments and decisions in the blink of an eye. The problem is that this happens so quickly we don’t recognize it ourselves. When two of us witness a similar event, perhaps as simple as a comment at a meeting, we each assign meanings and interpretations and arrive at “the truth” of “what just happened.” One witness interprets the comment as “angry and aggressive” while another may be sure it was “nothing at all.” Each is convinced of the rightness of their position because “I heard it with my own two ears!”

What the ladder of inference reveals are the subtle yet dramatic steps we take in moving from concrete experience to abstract interpretation. And while we spend vast amounts of time debating abstractions with one another, we miss the simpler places where our assumptions about the importance and meaning of particular pieces of the experience create widely divergent interpretations. By noticing the steps we take and openly talking about these with one another, we are often able to gain understanding that will never happen at the abstract level of thought. The discipline of revealing our assumptions and “thinking” steps with those around us helps to clarify potential differences of interpretations long before they get to the stage of conflict.³

You may be wondering why contemplative noticing and practical skills are given so much space in an article entitled, “Communal Discernment: Choosing with God in Community.” If we are to recognize the Spirit’s signs and movement in the lives of our organizations, we must first be able and open to noticing them. The Spirit’s presence often reveals itself in the moments in which each person chooses the way in which they will be present to the meeting and the other participants. Or when a group listens and speaks compassionately about its differences. It is in the moments of conscious choice that the Spirit can work with and through our freedom to create new possibilities. But what values should guide these choices?

² See *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization*. Eds. Peter M. Senge, et al. NY: Currency/Doubleday, 1994.

³ See *On Dialogue*. Eds. David Bohm and Lee Nicol. NY: Routledge, 1996.

In my work I find that people from all religions will agree that God is the source of all truth. In Christian scripture, Jesus doesn't say, "I tell the truth." But rather "I AM the Truth." If we accept Jesus at his word, then when we see the truth being told with compassion are we not seeing God's Spirit alive in our midst? And doesn't it change my perspective when I recognize that "my opponent," or simply "They," may in fact be attempting to witness to the truth as they have experienced it? This is not to say that all viewpoints or expressions are equal. This is not relativism. It is saying that if I listen with compassion to the deepest value being expressed by another person I will glimpse "the living Truth" making its presence known in his or her life.

God will not be manipulated. The awareness and process with which we approach our community lives often dictates the outcomes long before meetings begin. Hanging a prayer on the beginning or end of a meeting is not enough to change what happens within it. A verbally or procedurally violent process will not produce an outcome reflecting God's values. A sure sign of the lack of necessary contemplative awareness is the use of "We/They" language. Approaching a meeting with the goal (however well-intended) of "winning" or dominating the "opposition" may be acceptable culturally, but will not produce life-giving outcomes.

We are naturally pulled to meet force with force, and to respond to opposition by returning opposition. In fractured pre-Civil War America, *Roberts' Rules of Order* was designed to ensure order (a fair verbal fight) that could avoid physical violence. Yet we can now add to that powerful ways to draw more deeply on the human spirit and thereby access the deep common ground that is its source. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. And hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." He was speaking about how we can bring about change in communities. Change that gives life, builds lasting connections, and reflects God's dream for all people.

Collectively I refer to this practice as Contemplative Dialogue. It provides groups and their members with a greater ability to engage and overcome the challenges they collectively face, and to do so with integrity and compassion. It creates ways of drawing on what is best and most essential in each of us, and creates trustworthy ways to bring that into the work of our organizations and individual lives.

We can develop the practice of contemplative noticing, speaking together for common understanding, and recognizing the signs of Spirit's presence in our midst. In doing so we create the possibility of our organizations becoming communities through which God may touch and heal our fractured human family and world.

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