

DISCERNING GOD'S VISION TOGETHER¹

By Inagrace T. Dietterich

So I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream....With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together...knowing that we will be free one day. I have a dream today!

In 1963 Martin Luther King, Jr. eloquently shared his vision of the future. His faith-filled dream of freedom, dignity, and justice continues to inspire with courageous hope all who hear his words. The creative force of his vision comes not from his realistic talk about jobs, housing, and education, but because his words are filled with future-oriented images and symbols which appeal to the heart and stimulate the imagination.

King's dream illustrates the power and the importance of vision, of language and images which draw their resources from the rich potential of our imaginations to move beyond the limits of past and present experience to new possibilities. The vocabulary of vision -- promise, future, hope -- does not define reality exactly, but holds our sense of reality open to what can yet come to be.

As an expression of a compelling vision, Martin Luther King's dream is a call to action, to participation in God's "dream" of the reconciliation of humanity and the healing of all creation. Believing in a dynamic and active God who is always present in the midst of changing circumstances -- "Behold, I am doing a new thing" (Isa. 43:19), the church is called to be responsive, to learn, to grow, to change. Thus attempting to discover God's will for the church's ministry and mission is a perennial problem. There are no neat, quick, or easy answers.

The challenge for today's church is to be open to the power and to the promise of God's vision of the future -- to dream as King dreamed. Thus what is called for is not simply the creation of a "vision statement" as a planning tool, but a communal process of discernment which inspires hopes, supports hopes, and gives back to the church the capacity for dreaming.

Many local churches and other church bodies are currently involved in processes of visioning and/or discernment. Engaging in an exploration of new possibilities for the future, this is a positive and exciting trend. Yet if it is to be more than a passing fad, it is important to slow down, step back, and reflect

upon the presuppositions, conditions, and implications of church people coming together to pray, study, listen, test, struggle, and dream together. Because the goal is not simply to discover the vision of key leaders, or even of the community as a whole, but to discern together God's vision for the church's life and ministry, the usual methods of efficient, rational, and democratic decision making are inadequate.

This essay seeks to contribute to the church's efforts by exploring key aspects of communal discernment: the future orientation of human life, vision as seeing what is really real, the cultivation of faithful imaginations, the normative images of Scripture, the Holy Spirit as the source and guide for discernment, and the nature of the discerning community.

For Discussion and Reflection:

What is the difference between the creation of a vision statement and a communal process of discernment?

Outstretched Toward The Future

One of the wondrous aspects of human life is that as well as the ability to remember the past and to analyze the present, we have the capacity to project ourselves into the future. Wherever people are marrying and raising a family, learning and teaching fresh ideas, developing and marketing new products, preparing for vacations or retirements, there is an affirmation of the future, a trust in the future, and an investment in the future.

Our lives are characterized by a restlessness which does not allow us to remain satisfied with past experiences of fulfillment and achievement. We are always questioning, searching, seeking beyond the limitations of our present circumstances to discover the something "more" that currently escapes us. Try as we might, we are able neither to live simply in and for the moment, nor to rest comfortably in the accomplishments of the past. To be human is to dream of a future, to hope for it, to plan for it, and to dedicate our energies to the accomplishment of particular goals. While we may anticipate the future with hope or fear -- or a mixture of the two -- we cannot escape the reality that our lives are unfinished and open-ended, outstretched toward a future which does not yet exist.

As an open-ended journey, an adventure in search of meaning and fulfillment, human life resists all efforts at control

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and permanence. As hard as we might try to secure and order our lives and the world around us, the surprise of events, the actions of others, and the passage of time, continually disrupt and upset our best laid plans. It is this recognition of the incompleteness and future-oriented nature of life which indicates the relevance of hope. It is hope that recognizes the difference between what is and what could be. It is hope that creates the space for freedom and creativity. It is hope that gives us the courage to confront the uncertainty and to embrace the possibilities of the future.

In other words, where there is life, there is the future, and where there is the future, there is hope. Life without hope is a form of death for those who are still living. Remember, it was above the doorway to hell that Dante inscribed the words: "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here." This could be turned around to read: "Those enter here who have abandoned hope." A state of absolute hopelessness may be a very good description of hell.

Christians are called to be a people of hope. What distinguishes Christians is not the mere fact that they hope, but the basis, object, and scope of their hope. Over and over again, the biblical narratives declare that the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ is a God of promise and of hope. The courage to trust the future comes not from confidence in our own abilities and resources, but from confidence in the faithfulness of God to fulfill God's promises.

This hope-filled openness to the future is illustrated in the story of Abraham and Sarah. Their life situation is described as one of hopelessness: Sarah is barren, their family is at an end, there will be no future. Then God enters the despair of their lives and opens up a future of creative possibilities. God speaks a word of command: "Go from your country...", and a word of promise: "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:1,3). Sarah and Abraham are called to obey the command and believe the promise.

In contrast to the resistant and mistrustful world presented in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, they are receptive and responsive. They fully embrace God's call and venture forth into the unknown, trusting only in God's faithfulness. Sarah and Abraham leave their established security in search of a new future in a new community, in a city "whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10).

As they move away from all that is settled and routine, it is faith in God's word of promise which sustains and guides them. Thus their life journey manifests their confidence in the possibilities of the future which God's initiative has opened for

them. Because in hope they believed against hope (cf. Rom.4:18), Sarah and Abraham are lifted up in the New Testament and in the Christian tradition as models of faith, trust, and obedience.

For Discussion and Reflection:

1. What does it mean to speak of human life as "outstretched toward the future?"

Vision as Seeing What Is Really Real

The way in which we anticipate and participate in the future is shaped by our vision of what is really real. Sarah and Abraham believed that God's promise of new life was more real, more trustworthy, than the empirical evidence of Sarah's infertility. It is because the Christian community believes in a "God of Hope" (Rom. 15:13), a God who declares "See, I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:5), that its vision can be hopeful and even imaginative. Not limited or determined by the facts, figures, and trends of the current situation, believing hope imagines a new state of affairs not yet existing.

As we see with the eyes of faith, we are able to know the unknowable, to think the unthinkable, to experience the not yet. We are given the ability to imagine -- to visualize -- God's dream for humanity: a time when the lion and the lamb will lie down together, when swords will be pounded into ploughshares, when war will be no more, when the captives will be freed and the blind will see, when the hungry will be fed and the naked clothed. In other words, when all of creation will be transformed into a new heaven and a new earth.

Yet Christian hope is not naive or foolish. Indeed, it alone is truly realistic for it sees reality in light of the possibilities, the promises, the power of the God who creates and sustains all that exists. Rather than human progress or development, it is God's freedom and God's faithfulness which is the source of the new things that are to come. As declared by Jurgen Moltmann in his classic *Theology of Hope*: "When we have a God who calls into being the things that are not, then the things that are not yet, that are future, also become 'thinkable' because they can be hoped for."¹

The way in which the church is called to visualize or see the world does not come naturally. Humanity is a blinded race, we can no longer see what is real. Separated and alienated from God, preoccupied with our own desires and plans, we have become barren in our thinking and our minds are darkened and without sense (cf. Rom. 1:21). Because we believe the lie of the

serpent that we can have life and knowledge apart from God (cf. Gen. 3:1-6), we live in unreality and illusion.

Trusting in our own wisdom, we put forth our own gods (success, wealth, power, happiness). As we offer them our allegiance -- our worship -- these gods present us with their own visions of the meaning and purpose of human life. They tell us how to understand ourselves, how to determine our true worth, and how to relate to others.² The Apostle Paul vividly describes the quality of life shaped by this "fallen" vision of reality: "They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (Rom. 1:29-30).

Learning how truly to see -- to discern a faithful vision of reality -- is at the very heart of what it means to be Christian. God has granted the Christian community a special sight, a spirit of wisdom and revelation that enlightens the eyes of our hearts (cf. Eph. 1:17-18). Only as we are transformed by the renewing of our minds (cf. Rom. 12:2), are we able to see the world as it really is: the creation of a loving God who will not leave us to our own pride and rebellion, but is faithful to the divine promise of full and abundant life.

Engaging in processes of surfacing, testing, and transforming vision is not a periodic planning effort, but is, rather, central to the ministry and mission of the church. We all too often stress the importance of ideas and actions, while neglecting the power of vision to shape and determine that which we think and do. John Navone underscores the formative and substantive role of vision:

*Vision permeates our thoughts, desires, interests, ideals, imagination, feelings and body language; it is our worldview, our sense of life, our basic orientation towards reality. Our vision gives rise to our character, to our style of life, to our tone of being in the world. Vision is the way we grasp the complexity of life; it involves the meaning and value that we attach to the complexity of life as a whole and to the things of life in particular.*³

For Discussion and Reflection:

1. In what ways is "learning how truly to see" at the very heart of what it means to be Christian?
2. What is the power of vision? Illustrate from your own life experience.

Cultivating Faithful Imaginations

Influenced by popular understandings of science, contemporary persons tend to limit their attention to those aspects of reality which can be visualized in terms of Newtonian space and time. Anything that cannot be known concretely by the five senses, anything that might require imagination, is called "imaginary" and is therefore not considered to be really real.

The modern emphasis upon technical rationality often discounts the artistic contributions of musicians, painters, and novelists. We fail to recognize, for example, the significant role poetry can play in forming and transforming our vision of reality. As Walter Brueggemann points out: "Poets are discerners of newness, people who fashion images for hopes that have not yet become visible, who sense the deep undertow of life and welcome it, who present to us images of reality which are expectant and expansive, who are content to receive what they do not understand and to rely on that which they cannot control."⁴ Those creative persons who discipline, nurture, and utilize their imaginations, can stimulate all of us to hear, receive, read, see, and experience the world in new and different ways.

The function of imagination is to make present through images what is not accessible to direct experience. Rather than being artificial or illusionary, it is our imaginations which enable us to see more deeply and more clearly: to discover the possible in the actual, the new in the old, the unexpected in the known, the wonder in the ordinary. Thus, far from being the opposite of reality, imagination is the way in which the manifold forms and levels of reality are mediated to us. By divorcing our intellects from our imaginations, our heads from our hearts, we limit our creativity and restrict the possibilities of insight and discovery. The freedom of the future, the courage of hope, and the clarity of vision are all dependent upon imagination.

The cultivating of faithful imaginations is crucial for Christians who in this life "walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7), since "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). If we can not imagine a time of reconciliation and healing, when God will dwell with God's people and "wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more" (Rev. 21:3), then we are enslaved to our present experience of alienation and death. If we cannot imagine a time when the poor will hear good news, when the captives will be released, when the blind will recover their sight, and the oppressed will go free (cf. Luke 4:18), then we will be overwhelmed by the poverty, suffering, and injustice of our world. If we cannot imagine a time when God's will is

done on earth as in heaven, then to pray the Lord's Prayer is an exercise in futility. Faithfulness is not only about submitting our wills in obedience, but, and perhaps even more importantly, about opening and trusting our imaginations in delight and wonder.

For Discussion and Reflection:

1. What is the function of imagination?
2. What is meant by "faithful imaginations"?
3. Why is the cultivating of faithful imaginations important?

The Normative Images of Scripture

Vision, stimulated and inspired by imagination, is a wholistic frame of reference by which we see, interpret, and interact with the world around us. What is important is not simply that as Christians we imagine, but the images by which we imagine. It is the images which give shape and substance to our way of visualizing or seeing what is really real.

For example, if our image of the world is of a hostile and dangerous place, offering limited goods and opportunities, then we will view other human beings as competitors, and take steps to protect and defend our lives, livelihood, and loved ones. But, if our image of the world is of a creation declared good by God, filled with rich abundance and unlimited possibilities, then we will embrace others as companions in the adventure of life, and entrust our lives, livelihood, and loved ones to the grace and mercy of God.

Everyday in a multitude of seductive and convincing forms -- television, movies, advertising, sports, politics -- we are bombarded with competing images about the purpose and nature of human life. If our imaginations are to be faithful and thus bring clarity of vision, they must be informed by appropriate and truthful images. For the church it is the metaphors, stories, and images discovered within Scripture that provide the normative images for an open, trusting, and hope-filled vision of the world and our place within it.

Richard Hays in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* offers significant wisdom and counsel in the process of discerning God's vision. His stated goal is to help Christians learn how to read the New Testament in such a way that they might live in imaginative obedience to its moral vision. Focusing upon the common life of discipleship, his vision of the church is of a Scripture-shaped community which listens responsively and acts responsibly.

Believing that the unity and sense of Scripture is discovered through an integrative act of imagination, he identifies three root images which can focus and guide our reading of the New Testament: community, cross, and new creation. Not separate and distinct, these three images form an integrated whole: "The Church must be a **community** living in conformity to the paradigm of the **cross** and thereby standing as a sign of the **new creation** promised by God."⁵

1. Community.

Contemporary categories, presuppositions, and experiences have largely blinded us to the radical nature of the biblical image of community. Because in Jesus Christ all that alienates us from God and divides us from one another has been overcome, the Holy Spirit is at work creating a communal reality of holy living, mutual support, and sacrificial service which the New Testament calls "*koinonia*." Challenging the old competitive order of independence, self-interest, and private privilege (*idios*), Christian community indicates a new collaborative order of interdependence, shared responsibility, and commonality (*koinos*).

As the concrete social manifestation of God's dream for humanity, this community embodies an alternative vision of reality through a "praxis of togetherness" -- a life of "one anothering."⁶ Those who by faith and baptism form the body of Christ, are called to be "members of one another" (Rom. 12:5), "who are to build up one another" (1 Thess. 5:11), "be devoted to one another in love" (Rom. 12:10), "admonish one another" (Rom. 15:14), "be servants of one another" (Gal. 5:13), "live in harmony with one another" (Rom. 12:16). It is through the social practice of Christian togetherness that the fruit of the Spirit -- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control -- is manifested as we "bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2).

Thus Christian community is not first a sociological entity but a theological experience -- a joint participation in God's vision, reign, reality, world -- which enables us to participate with one another in a *koinonia* of faith, hope, and love (cf. 1 Cor. 13:3).

2. Cross.

Into the midst of our efforts to discern God's vision come these disconcerting words from the Apostle Paul: "For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'...we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to

Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:19, 23). Contrary to all human expectations, the New Testament declares that God defeated the alienating and distorting powers of evil not through the triumph of superior force, but through the unjust suffering and violent death of Jesus of Nazareth.

While it may be comforting to believe that Jesus died for our sins, we may not be as ready to embrace the image of the cross as indicating the shape, direction, and destiny of the life and witness of the church: "take up your cross and follow me." We much prefer to believe that the world will welcome our faith, our spirituality, our morality, our service -- our vision of reality, and reward us with growth in members, wealth, status, and influence. The way of the cross -- humility, sacrifice, rejection, persecution, and suffering, even unto death -- does not market well in a consumer-oriented, "meet my needs" culture.

In other words, the cross is still a scandal and a folly within the dominant vision of our contemporary world. Yet the New Testament consistently interprets Jesus' death as an act of self-sacrificial love that establishes the way of the cross as the norm for Christian discipleship. Thus the unique and unrepeatable nature of Jesus' own sense of vocation extends to those who would be his disciples.

The church's identity and vision is to be discovered and expressed through self-giving love: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us -- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1 John 3:16). As a disciple community whose life is shaped by the reconciling peace of God accomplished in the cross, the church becomes capable of the unimaginable: forgiveness of enemies, welcoming of the poor and outcast, loving service knowing no limits, confidence in the face of rejection, trust in the surpassing power of God's love and forgiveness.

3. New Creation.

In Jesus Christ God's promised future invaded the present. What God brought about through the cross and resurrection, was not a new religious system or a new set of moral principles. The raising of the crucified man, Jesus of Nazareth, from the dead was an event of cosmic proportions: into the midst of the old creation of sin, darkness, and death, God inaugurated a new creation of forgiveness, light, and life. The biblical image of new creation signifies not only a redeemed humanity, but a renewed earth, set free from its "bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:21). The worldly forces (i.e., class privilege, economic advantage, environmental exploitation, gender domination, ethnic discrimination, absolute loyalty to family, religion, or nation) that subvert and block the actualization of God's vision for God's creation have been unmasked, exposed, disarmed (Col. 2:15).

In the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has acted to defeat the powers and principalities that hold humanity in bondage (with our all too willing assent and support), and thus offers freedom and new life in communion with God and all that God creates. We have been set free from the influence of the present evil age (cf. Gal. 1:4).

Not a private or interior religious experience, this is a matter of radical transformation: "If any one is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17). As the first fruits of God's new creation, the disciple community visualizes and experiences reality in a whole new way. In the inspiring words of N.T. Wright: "We are invited to open our eyes and see new life, open our minds and believe new life, open our hearts and love new life, open our hands and give new life. And we are invited to do this because Jesus is risen, and with him the new creation has come into being."⁷

The images of Scripture are normative -- have authority and relevance -- because the Bible is "the source of our knowledge of God, of our vision of God's purpose, of our encounter with the Messiah, of our call to vocation as God's people, of our hope for creation's healing."⁸ The distinctiveness of Christianity is not that Christians believe in God, affirm correct doctrines, live good lives, or engage in works of service (as important as these are). What is distinctive is the forming of a particular people who listen to particular stories, discern a particular vision of reality, and live their lives by particular words and images.

It is as Christian communities read, listen, reflect, and learn together, that they will experience the inspirational and imaginative force of Scripture: its power to in-form, re-form and trans-form the human imagination. Thus as the church seeks to discern God's vision for its future ministry and mission, the intentional and substantive study of Scripture must be at the heart of the process.

For Discussion and Reflection:

1. What is the role of images?
2. What strikes you about the description of these three root images? Why are they important?
 - a. Community
 - b. Cross
 - c. New Creation

"It Seemed Good to the Holy Spirit and to Us"

While vision indicates an overview of reality in its relatedness and wholeness, discernment indicates an insight into

particular aspects or contexts of this vision of reality. For example, while joining with other congregations in following a crucified and risen Lord, the way of the cross will take particular shape within the life and practice of particular congregations. God's forgiveness, love, and mercy are not manifested in general, but in the midst of concrete relationships and situations of ministry.

It is the Holy Spirit -- God's personal presence -- who enables the church both to discern and to express its particular way of life. Discernment is a process of practical judgment, of sorting, distinguishing, evaluating, of sifting among competing stimuli, demands, longings, desires, and influences. To discern God's vision together is to discover and to test "what is the will of God -- what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:3) for a particular congregation with its particular gifts, challenges, and opportunities for ministry.

The wisdom sought in the process of discernment is not the wisdom of a rebellious world seeking to live by its own vision of reality, but the true wisdom of God. That which "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived" (1 Cor. 2:9), has been revealed by the Spirit of God to those who love God. It is the Holy Spirit -- God's enlightening and empowering presence -- who teaches, convinces, and guides the community of believers into all truth (cf. John 16:13). As the demonstration that God's promised future has been set in motion, it is the Spirit who enables the church to abound in hope, to live in joy, to pray without ceasing, to have insight into God's will and purposes.⁹

Thus God's vision, God's truth, God's will, cannot be legislated by the political maneuvering of special interest groups, but only through prayer and conversation which expects to hear and listens for the Spirit in the midst of the community's deliberations. It is within the context of Christian communities that "we learn -- as the body of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit -- to interpret, and to have our lives interpreted by, the scriptural texts such that we are formed and transformed in the moral judgment necessary for us to live faithfully before God."¹⁰

Discernment is not an individual, but a communal endeavor, for the Holy Spirit works through group processes -- the interaction of the two or three gathered together in the name of Jesus Christ.

For Discussion and Reflection:

1. What is the difference between vision and discernment?
2. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in discernment?

Becoming a Discerning Community

Communal discernment occurs within a community of giftedness: all have received gifts of the Holy Spirit to be used for the edification, encouragement, and consolation of the entire body. Thus it is important for all to be involved in the process of discerning God's future vision.

The Apostle Paul continually insists that every member of the body of Christ has the responsibility to share the particular insights she or he has been given (cf. 1 Cor. 12-14). All are called "to instruct one another" (Rom. 15:14), to speak God's word "so that all may learn and all be encouraged" (1 Cor. 14:31), to "teach and admonish one another in all wisdom" (Col. 3:16). It is through "speaking the truth in love" that the community is to "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:15).

So the characteristic setting in which the church discerns God's vision is when Christians come together to share and evaluate the gifts given to them. Here in a variety of complementary ways, guidance is conveyed through each to all, and through all to each.

The communal process of discernment thus both assumes and creates a church characterized by open dialogue, critical reflection, genuine respect, mutual trust, and active collaboration. In other words, the goal is not simply the development of a "product" -- a vision statement, but the experience of *koinonia* -- Christian community. Rather than expecting people to be of like mind, the intent is to enable a diverse people to discern one mind -- the mind "which is yours in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5).

As the church opens itself to the movement of God's Spirit in the midst of the community's lived experience, shared "pictures of the future" will emerge that foster genuine commitment and enthusiasm. More discovered than constructed, vision is a gift of the Holy Spirit that is evoked from within the life of the community and is confirmed by the community. The intentionality and the quality of the discernment process, especially the ability to enrich the dialogue through the creative use of difference (and even perhaps of conflict), will determine the character and the power of the resulting expression of vision.

The corporate or shared nature of discernment means developing resources and designing processes which enable people at every level of the church body to discern the wisdom of the Spirit and to offer their vision of God's calling for the church. A discerning community which cultivates faithful

imaginations, will make the space and set aside the time for significant opportunities for listening and hearing, for studying and reflecting, for sharing and testing.

And equally important, and perhaps even more difficult for contemporary church leaders and members, such a community will not rush to judgment, but will know the importance of waiting upon the Spirit in humble expectation, silence, and prayer. And so it is appropriate that this exploration of how we might discern God's vision together close with a biblical prayer for discernment.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God (Phil. 1:9-11).

For Discussion and Reflection:

1. Why is discernment a communal process?
2. What are the characteristics of communal discernment?
3. What are the barriers to cultivating a congregation as a discerning community?
4. Identify ways in which the barriers might be overcome?

FOR MORE INFORMATION

This essay is one of a series of articles by the staff of the Center for Parish Development and is based on the Center's research and experience in guiding church organizations through processes of planned missional transformation -- major and profound change rooted in the Christian tradition. Since 1968 the staff of the Center has been developing the theological and practical process resources to help North American churches make their way from their former dominant position as part of the "cultural establishment" into becoming "missional churches" in today's post-establishment missionary environment.



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