Learning the Value of Group Discernment
By Lorraine Watson

Every church that I’ve been a part of wants to follow God’s leading in their decision making processes. Meetings begin with prayer, asking for God’s wisdom. Then people proceed with the work in front of them. At the end of the meeting a blessing is prayed over the decisions made and those who will implement them. Churches generally emphasize the need for mature, spiritual leaders at these meetings so that mature, spiritual decisions can be made. People coming to the meeting are expected to do their centering spiritual work prior to the meeting, arriving ready to participate in the task at hand.

It wasn’t until recent years that I gained appreciation for a different model—discernment. In this model, God is actively brought into the entire meeting and is actively part of each decision. We begin by centering and Listening, inviting God to give direct Leading to those gathered. This opening is not dissimilar to the process I described at other churches. However what makes the group discernment process unique is that throughout the meeting we pause and Listen in silence for further Leading. Frequently we share what we hear as we wait in the silence. We persist in the process until there is clarity that we are following God’s Leading. This requires patience. If there is a dissenting voice, we Listen again to see if there is more to be considered. But way forward is not compromise with the dissenter; rather it is discerning God’s Leading in the matter at hand. That takes prayer and Listening beyond the wisdom of those gathered.

The discernment model also allows for the reality that even mature, spiritual leaders are sometimes not their best selves. And sometimes there are those among us who do not have the depth of spiritual maturity expected. But as discerners, we gather anyway and Listen to God together. We acknowledge that it isn’t about our individual leadings but about discerning God’s Leading. We acknowledge that God can speak to and through anyone—a child, someone not of our fellowship or even a non-Christian. We acknowledge that God will Lead us and that,
as a group gathered, we can know that Leading. We Listen past the surface to find God’s Leading.

The first model may be more efficient and linear, but it can miss God’s Leading for us. I believe it is less able to deal with differences in a way that honors people and allows God to lead through the unexpected. It is more dependent on spiritual leadership than on the imminent Leading of God.

Even though I was raised Quaker and have participated in Quaker decision making for over half a century, I was ill equipped to do discernment. In recent years our Yearly Meeting has emphasized the discernment model. At North Seattle Friends Church we use the discernment model as well. When our church grappled with the future of our daycare, it was through discernment that we were able to come to a unanimous decision to lay down the ministry without splitting the church. With that and other experiences, I’ve come to see incredible value in doing discernment. But it is a process that doesn’t come naturally to most of us. The world tells us to be more efficient and choose good leaders. I never want to trade efficiency for knowing the mind of Christ.

Two years ago, I attended the first “Leadership Institute for Group Discernment” in Newberg, Oregon and found it very helpful in gaining needed skills for discernment as well as a much deeper understanding of what is involved. I encourage others to attend the institute this year. It is very practical and useful.

The Leadership Institute for Group Discernment will be held from May 17—20, 2010 on the campus of George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. For more details, please click here.

Lorraine Watson is the pastor at North Seattle Friends Church and a Board Member with Good News Associates. She is currently on sabbatical somewhere in the Southwestern part of the United States.

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