

Guidelines for Communal Discernment: A Critique

by Viola Larson

A booklet titled *Guidelines for Communal Discernment*, written by Victoria G. Curtiss, was used by the 218th General Assembly as a way to explore an alternative to parliamentary procedure for decision-making. When the Assembly decided to send the proposed change to the *Book of Order* that will replace G-6.0106b, it added the following comment: “Presbyteries are strongly encouraged to consider this overture using a process of listening and discernment.”

As we approach the vote on Amendment B, Presbyterians will benefit from understanding the differences between a “communal discernment process” and parliamentary procedure. We should be alert to the influences of process on the participants and the outcome. Further, we should be alert to how “spirituality” can become manipulative.

“Discernment” process seeks to avoid a vote

Although the *Guidelines* do not define communal discernment as “consensus decision-making,” the two concepts are basically the same. Communal discernment does not follow parliamentary procedure. Instead, a facilitator guides the discernment conversation using various techniques to help the members reach a decision. Decision-making using this process is complicated and even confusing. The facilitator or another member eventually offers what the *Guidelines* call a “trial balloon,” which is “a summary statement based on group input that expresses where the Holy Spirit seems to be leading the body.”

Various non-voting methods are suggested in the *Guidelines* to find out if the members of the group agree with the trial balloon. The trial balloon must be accepted or rejected, so in an attempt not to vote, several ideas are suggested. One is the five finger method, going from five fingers, “I am fully supportive,” to one finger, “I cannot support this at this time.” If a decision is not reached, several suggestions for resolving the dilemma are given, including “appoint a smaller group or a person to make the decision.” Thus the whole group’s responsibility is delegated to a smaller, less representative body—a contradiction of the intent of our form of government.

There are three problems with the kind of “discernment process” that is offered in this document. First, consensus decision-making manipulates participants. Second, the participants lose rights they would have under parliamentary procedure. Third, “spirituality” is used as a control mechanism.

Consensus decision-making manipulates participants

The *Guidelines* say, “Discernment seeks more than group agreement. The goal is to recognize when ‘it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us’ (Acts 15:28).” But this is not contrary to parliamentary procedure; the guidance of the Holy Spirit is also a goal of parliamentary procedure in the church. The difference here between the two is that the author suggests some rather subjective ways of knowing if a decision is the will of the Holy Spirit. Such feelings and emotions as “God’s presence settling over the group in silence,” and a “joyous convergence of direction that brings a sense of peace and rightness,” are indicators for a final decision.

Marianne L. Wolfe, author of the booklet, *Parliamentary Procedures in the Presbyterian Church (USA)* explains that consensus decision-making “at its worst” is “manipulative and overpowering to the rights of the minority because it compels the minority to ‘break the unity of the body’ in order to disagree.” The *Guidelines* compound the problem. They say:

Consensus as used in [the Guidelines] does not mean unanimity. It refers to a shared sense of God’s presence as manifest through the group’s work together and through the decision reached. Members of the group affirm that they have been heard and are willing to move ahead

in a common direction that most, if not all, have sensed to be the leading of the Holy Spirit.
(emphasis added)

So the objective is not consensus in the *decision*, but consensus *about sensing the presence of God*. This is a dangerous move because now to be in ardent disagreement as a minority means not only breaking the unity of the body, but denying the felt presence of God in the work and decision.

Participants lose rights they would have under parliamentary procedure.

Wolfe explains the rights of individuals in parliamentary principles:

Parliamentary principles attempt to balance the expression of individual conscience with the will of the majority. In so doing, these principles take very seriously the following rights of individuals in the body.

Wolfe then lists the “right to know,” the “right to speak,” and the “right to vote” as important themes behind the various procedures and rules in parliamentary governance. One sees immediately that “communal discernment” generally takes away the right to vote. But there are other losses as well.

Loss of the right to know and to be heard

For instance, the right to know and the right to speak (or to be heard) are downgraded in “communal discernment.” This happens in several ways. The *Guidelines* suggest that groups larger than twenty persons should be divided into smaller groups. This means that presbyteries and committees at GA which use this method will be divided into smaller groups, each with a facilitator. Because of that division, each small group will not hear the whole committee’s comments. Those who find themselves in the minority in a small group will undoubtedly be alone and perhaps afraid to express their true feelings. Lacking the full committee, the minority person will experience the loss of hearing from those with whom they agree. The majority will miss hearing the thoughts of the minority who fail to speak because of timidity or even fear.

Another example of losing the right to know is given under the *Guidelines*’ subtitle “The Community listens to the Holy Spirit.” It says, “Participants need to practice the grace to lay aside ego, preconceived notions, biases, and predetermined conclusions that may limit openness to God in order to reach ‘holy indifference.’” However, if we do not speak our convictions and conclusions, those who hear us will be cheated out of knowing who we are and what we truly believe.

A further restriction on the right to know and to be heard is described in the *Guidelines* as follows:

*Before a large group considers an issue, it is usually helpful for a subgroup, preferably consisting of persons with a variety of perspectives on the matter, to meet first to consider what information the larger body needs. It is helpful to distribute, in advance of the meeting, written material that defines the issue and provides background information as well as the rationale for a particular proposal, if there is one. Such material does not preclude the consideration of other options, but brings the whole body on board with the reflection **previously done by a few persons**.* (emphasis added)

Although other material may be looked at, this process leaves the larger group under the tyranny of a few, limits the focus of the group, and severely limits information. The right to know is once again limited.

“Spirituality” is used as a control mechanism

Debating and voting using parliamentary procedure follows definite rules. The “communal discernment” process, on the other hand, offers multiple rules to choose from and anchors them to subjective spiritual feelings as well as spiritual practices that are meant for far different settings. In addition, the *Guidelines* misuse the work and person of the Holy Spirit.

The *Guidelines* state that the Holy Spirit's "movement...cannot be predicted or packaged." The *Guidelines* give three theological principles for discernment. They rightly explain that Jesus Christ is head of the Church, but go on to misinterpret several texts that deal with the work of the Holy Spirit including John 14:16, 26 and 16:13. Their paraphrase separates the Holy Spirit from Scripture: "God sends us the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth, to teach us everything, and to remind us of all that Jesus Christ said." This separation of the participant's inner feeling from Scripture is one of the most serious problems of the *Guidelines*' process.

Calvin, commenting on John 16:13, writes, "The same Spirit led them [the apostles] into '**all truth**' when they wrote down the substance of their teaching." (emphasis added) Calvin is pointing out the connection between the Holy Spirit and Scripture. Likewise, Calvin writing on John 14:26 explains, "But observe what all these things are which he [Jesus] promises the Spirit will teach. He '**will remind you of everything I have said to you.**'" (emphasis added)

Commenting further, Calvin writes:

But the spirit that introduces any new idea apart from the Gospel is a deceiving spirit, and not the Spirit of Christ. Christ promises the Spirit who will confirm the Gospel teaching as if he were signing it.

The *Guidelines* go on to describe the Holy Spirit as "unpredictable," and use the unpredictability to shape the process. When something or someone is unpredictable, there is a need to be open to the unexpected and the new. Thus the *Guidelines* exhort participants in the process to remain open to new ideas. They offer spiritual technologies to guide participants toward openness: "there are spiritual practices that can enable us to be more receptive and attentive to God and one another and help us discern the mind of Christ."

Lectio Divina as a decision-making device

Lectio Divina is another way commissioners lose their right to speak since this method only allows them to respond to someone else's question on a selected passage of Scripture rather than allowing them to speak their own mind and consider the whole of Scripture.

Lectio Divina is a spiritual exercise in meditation meant for reflection and growth in faith. It is inappropriate as a substitute for parliamentary procedure in decision-making. The *Guidelines* suggest looking at several Scripture passages prior to the meeting, and then focusing on one at the meeting. At the meeting, questions are asked between each reading of the same Scripture, such as "What one word or phrase leaps out at you from the passage?"

To understand how this hinders a good decision, think of a Christian who is visited by two Jehovah's Witnesses. They discuss the Trinity or the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Jehovah's Witnesses are taught to stay with certain verses or passages when discussing one of their beliefs. They want to focus on just a few words and their meaning. That is control. But the wise Christian knows they will not get a true picture of the biblical view from just one verse or word. So it is with decision-making. In decision-making, Christians should allow the Holy Spirit to use the whole text, not just a phrase or a word.

Other misuses of the Holy Spirit

There are other ways a misunderstanding of the Holy Spirit leads to the loss of the right to speak. The *Guidelines* insist that participants lay aside "their biases and predetermined conclusions." They also encourage writing "on an index card anything that he or she is aware of that may block 'holy indifference.'"

"Debate" vs. "Discernment"

The *Guidelines* make a comparison between "debate" and "discernment." Debate, it says, uses "hard data to get to answers to problems; reasoning is made explicit." Discernment, it says, uses "intellect/reason and

affect/intuition: mind and spirit experience.” But there is no such necessary dichotomy. The Presbyterian engaging in debate is to seek to be guided by the Holy Spirit. The debater uses “reason and sound judgment” to understand how to obey God’s will as it is set forth in Scripture and to apply that to the situation at hand. It is in Scripture that the Church finds her final authority for decision-making—not in feelings or experiences, though feeling and experience may commend the Scripture to us.

The *Guidelines* offer another contrast between debate and discernment. Debate intends to resolve issues “by defeating or persuading” the “opposing side.” Discernment, by contrast, uncovers “a decision rather than [making] it” and discovers “what is most life-giving and loving by listening to [the] wisdom of the Holy Spirit and all voices.” In the *Guidelines*, debate “defends a viewpoint” while discernment “offers ‘holy indifference’ to all but God’s will.” The participant reading this could be intimidated, thinking that somehow debate is unholy, while practicing this kind of “discernment” is holy. Feeling this way he loses his right to speak what is in his heart and mind. This can only curtail his faithfulness to the other participants and to Jesus Christ. It is false and manipulative to portray debate as spiritually inferior to “discernment.”

There are numerous control mechanisms in *Guidelines for Communal Discernment*. They move from constant checking of the feelings and emotions of the participants, to the use of silence to refocus the group, to the actual use of a monitor who observes “the dynamics and interaction among group members, reminding the group of its norms and values, helping pace the process by tracking the time allotted, and recommending breaks or times out.”

Conclusion

For the PC(USA), a denomination racked by significant disagreements over vital doctrine and polity, and filled with distrust and lack of unity, *Guidelines for Communal Discernment* is simply more fuel to add to an already burning fire. In this kind of “discernment process,” consensus decision-making manipulates participants, the participants lose rights they would have under parliamentary procedure, and “spirituality” is used as a control mechanism—all under the guise of creating good will and unity in the Body of Christ.

In contrast, parliamentary procedure provides a fair and protected forum for an exchange of ideas and allows the majority to prevail while protecting minority rights. It enables Presbyterian government to be “ordered according to the Word by reason and sound judgment” (G-1.0100c). The glory belongs to Jesus Christ.

References

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