

Out of silence: The practice of congregational discernment

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [April 3, 2007](#) issue

I had agreed, along with 11 other people from my congregation, to attend a program on congregational discernment, but I was not looking forward to it. I was skeptical of the diocese's ability to teach a nonbureaucratic method of reaching decisions, and I was also skeptical about our group's ability to discern anything. Few of us could have defined the word *discernment*, and none of us had any idea what we were in for.

Congregational discernment is a vague phrase, and yet it is one gaining a foothold in many churches. The concept is shaping concrete practices, such as the way Presbyterian churches have sought to work through controversies over sexuality; the deliberative procedures adopted by the World Council of Churches; and the decision-making styles of many congregations. Two specific practices ground discernment: silence and the use of consensus in decision making.

The training my group was to undergo was developed by Catherine Tran. Like many of the practices being adopted by congregations nationwide, Tran's approach has roots in both Quaker traditions of corporate discernment and Catholic models of spiritual direction. Both models rely heavily on prayer and silence and emphasize pondering questions over time. While much of this method may seem like common sense—what congregation doesn't pray?—few congregations apply silence and contemplation to matters of church business.

Our session focused on learning how to help a person discern a call to ministry (the procedure can be used for other church issues, such as deciding what hymnal to use in worship). As we gathered in a circle on folding chairs, the trainer passed out folders. Inside each was a half-sheet of blue paper. "This is the heart of the discernment process," she told us, "and today we are simply going to practice it."

The blue sheet outlined a procedure for silence and speaking. One person played the role of the candidate for ordination who was seeking to discern a call. Three people

were designated as responders and the rest of us were assigned the role of “compassionate observers.”

Over about 30 minutes we were silent together, and then various people were offered opportunities to speak and to respond. What emerged from the silence and the listening was something strikingly different from our normal conversation. By punctuating our communication with silence, we were stripped of the desire to offer advice or jump in with stories from our own experience. By staying intentionally silent between remarks, we found ourselves offering words and images that came up from another, seemingly deeper place.

The landscape into which we entered in this conversation was something more like a dreamscape than I had anticipated. Incongruent words and images emerged and then retreated without announcing their precise intentions. There was no linear movement toward resolution, and yet as the silence drew to a close and we moved back into more ordinary conversation, we had a sense of having built a deeper intimacy.

Over the past ten years, First United Methodist Church of Bixby, Oklahoma, has transformed its way of doing church business by using models for spiritual discernment. The church’s councils work by consensus, and contemplative silence and prayer punctuate church meetings.

Pastor Jessica Moffatt Seay was frustrated by the way the traditional patterns of church business often meant that the most animated and substantive conversations took place in the parking lot—after a vote had been taken. She wondered how she might generate a deeper and richer conversation—including richer disagreement—during meetings.

Meanwhile, her church was experiencing a growth spurt, which raised issues regarding space, Sunday school and worship preferences. When Seay gathered a small group to consider the problem of space she simultaneously happened upon models for spiritual discernment. The group practiced silence and prayer together using a model developed by retired United Methodist bishop David Lawson.

Among the most significant things to emerge from that experiment, Seay said, was that the people showed more humility toward one another and seemed more open to the idea that the voice of God might come from someone else’s mouth. Then what Seay called the miraculous started happening. Land was donated to the

church. The discernment group heard a call to build a retirement community, and from its clear vision came fast and furious activity. Over time, the practices learned by that small group were adapted for the administrative council and brought to other committees of the church.

“We went from being a group of people talking about our opinions, feasibility studies and surveys to being a church that got quiet to listen to God in prayer and looked for the voice of God in others, in humility,” said Seay. “We started doing business differently.”

That difference has taken a great deal of time to enact, and Seay says that not every decision merits using a discernment model. But members of the congregation have learned to identify issues that might require periods of deeper reflection. Instead of asking for a vote, committee chairs may ask, “Have we reached a conclusion or do we need to talk longer?” Instead of starting a debate, committee members may say, “This feels like an issue that requires discernment.”

By integrating silence and agreeing to work by consensus, congregations learn a way of being in community together. Says author and retired Episcopal priest Mary Earle: “People begin to understand that prayer life and congregational life are of a piece. Contemplative practices teach a way of being together that is shaped by listening. In that environment, people are less likely to assume that they must manage disagreement by quarreling or leaving.”

One of the great strengths of contemplative discernment practices is that they can move people toward unity. Paul Anderson, a professor at George Fox University, has been working with a group of pastors and scholars for two years on discernment in an interdenominational setting. “Progress toward unity is often more efficiently made in five to seven minutes of quiet than it is in an hour of debate.” Silence, Anderson says, has a way of distilling hopes and fears, of letting muddy water settle so that groups can see more clearly.

But silence can also be painful. In our own group, silence was by no means embraced wholeheartedly. For some, silence was life’s daily, dreaded companion. For others, silence was linked to their experience of failed relationships. During our first practice session after receiving the diocesan training, the silence between words proved too much for one member, who stormed out. Another confessed that silence was terribly uncomfortable. “I’ve never seen silence as a good thing,” he

said.

Experts offer two suggestions for overcoming a group's resistance to silence. One is keeping the silence limited to a specific period of time so participants know that it will not be indefinite. In our training, one member was assigned to be the timekeeper and to ring a bell to punctuate the silence after three minutes. The second suggestion is the reminder that silence needs to be practiced. Author Jane Vennard emphasizes that only through experience can a person come to know the benefits of communal silence. Silence is a discipline and something that groups grow into over time.

While silence is one difficult element of congregational discernment, the second element, consensus, is perhaps even more difficult. Whether it's deciding to recarpet the hallway or determining how much to spend on outreach, most congregations use some form of parliamentary procedure. Using that procedure means that congregations have winners and losers. Up-or-down votes go to the majority, and minority voices are at that moment silenced.

Practitioners of discernment say that consensus in the context of congregational discernment is not a matter of everyone agreeing. Instead, it is a matter of seeking to determine and define God's will for a particular congregation in a particular instance. With decision making taking place in the context of prayer, punctuated by silence, the question for church councils is not "Do we all agree?" but "Do we have a sense of what God is doing?" If not, then the discernment must continue.

Seay speaks of three kinds of consensus, and in only one case does it mean total unanimity. The first kind of consensus is the easiest: everyone agrees. In the second type, someone disagrees with some aspect of the decision but has decided that she can live with it. In the third type of consensus, someone disagrees completely, but still feels that she can live with the decision. In Quaker practice, this is called a difference of "preference." A participant may determine that his difference is a matter of preference, not principle, and agree to go along with the decision of the majority.

Consensus has not been reached, however, when any one member cannot live with the decision and believes that his reason for differing is one of principle. In this case, the group agrees to spend more time in silence and prayer until its members gain a common vision.

This way of doing business calls for an alternative understanding of time. Consensus building and the practice of silence can appear, at least on the surface, to be far more time-consuming than more traditional practices. A certain efficiency appears to be present when a committee uses Robert's Rules of Order and discussions lead to a proposal which proceeds to a vote.

Suzanne Farnham, whose organization Listening Hearts has worked with dozens of church groups to transform procedures on the basis of contemplative principles, says, "It's true that you can't have quite as many items on your agenda when you work this way." Shifting from a business model to a contemplative model requires more than just a shift in attitude or an agreement that the group will practice prayerful listening. It is an agreement that all decisions will be guided by prayer and not follow a predetermined timeline.

Advocates of these models say it's not necessarily true that discernment is more time-consuming. Anderson says, "It's inefficient to make a quick decision on something and then browbeat people who were never convinced of it in the first place. It is far more efficient to take time in the problem-defining phase to truly listen both to each other and for the will of God."

Discernment models allow for a greater range of participation, a richer discussion and a better final result, the advocates argue. Author and workshop leader Debra Farrington compares discernment to "going with the flow of the water instead of swimming upstream." She stresses that practicing corporate discernment does not mean that everything suddenly becomes clear. Instead, practitioners gain a sense of peace and clarity as they move through difficulties.

Of course, the fact that meetings are punctuated by silence does not mean that dissenting voices will necessarily be heard, nor does consensus itself guarantee that the will of God has been heard and understood. Many people may hesitate to place decision making in the hands of a group process that can veer in any number of directions. And congregations cannot always maintain an "indifference to outcome" when crucial aspects of church identity and church life are at stake. Still, advocates of discernment say that adhering to specific models and specific practices can help to allay these concerns, and discernment practices can have impact on all aspects of congregational life, with the net result a richer communion.

After our initial training session, our group gathered back at our church. In front of us was the task of discerning a member's call to the diaconate.

Our efforts at putting what we had learned into practice floundered a bit. Even with the written notes we had been given, we argued over the procedure. A small but mounting power struggle emerged between two members of the group. We labored to settle into a meaningful silence while sitting on folding chairs. Further frustrating our efforts was the candidate for the deaconate himself, who was finding it difficult to be a "seeker." Yet we have continued to meet together, and have seen enough value in the process to consider how we might use these practices in our church administrative council meetings and, more important, how they might over time teach us new ways to be together.