



**An extract from *Sharing Wisdom: A process for group decision making*, McKinney, M.B., 1987**

## **The God of the Gathering**

A model of church built on the philosophy of shared wisdom has strong scriptural support. The basic concept upon which the model rests is the presence of the Spirit in the very lives of the people involved and therefore in the functioning of the group. In Matthew 18:20 Jesus tells us:

*For where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them!*

We can hear Jesus saying to us through these words:

- When you come together to pray, I shall be with you.
- When you come together to break bread, I shall be with you.
- When you come together to be and to build church, I shall be with you.

Too many of us remember a translation that gave us a visual image that has proven less than helpful. It went like this:

*When two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of you.*

The problem phrase was “in the midst of you.” The visual image was of this invisible presence that was somehow right in the middle of the room in which we gathered. Such an image missed the point. Far more intimate is the promise of our God! He will not simply be in the room with us. He will live in our very beings – calling, forming, challenging, speaking, listening. Or, to put it another way, He will be using our ears, our voices, our minds and hearts to be His presence in and for His church.

Jesus Himself promised us such identity, such intimacy, when He said to His followers:

*And know that I am with you always*

*Matthew 28:20*

And, as His words are recorded from the Last Supper, he provides us with an insight that is

critical to our understanding of this promise. In John’s Gospel we read:

*I will not leave you orphans: I will come back to you...*

*If you love me you will keep my word, and my Father with love you, and we shall come to you...*

*The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything.*

*John 14:18, 23, 26*

So, Jesus came back. But the Gospel stories that follow the resurrection event clearly indicate that he did not come back as His followers had expected. So different was He, in fact, that they did not even recognise Him!

Reflect on those stories and you find a grieving Mary, a woman who loved Jesus deeply, knew Him intimately. Yet when she encountered Him in the garden, she did not know who He was! The little group of travelers on the road to Emmaus had the same problem. All they could think about or talk about was their sense of loss and disappointment over this man they had come to love and respect, this man they had worked with, lived with, celebrated with, struggled with for three years. Few people knew Jesus as well as they did. But they did not know Him as He walked the journey with them.

All the post-resurrection stories have this same theme. Why? Because the Risen Lord had taken on a new way of being present to His people. He was the gardener. He was the stranger. He was teaching and showing them and this is what Scripture scholar Eugene LaVerdiere says this way: “The greatest presence of the Risen Lord is another human being.”

The Lord Jesus has not left us orphans! Indeed, He has returned. Through the presence of the Spirit in our lives and in the lives of one another, the Risen Lord calls, forms, challenges, affirms, speaks, listens, lives!

Our God is the God of the Gathering.

True, we find God in Scripture, in Eucharist and sacrament. But we also find this God of ours within our very lives and within the lives of one another –



present in the gathering as we strive to be and to build church, present in our council and board meetings, present in team and staff faculty members.

Which takes us back to a philosophy of shared wisdom. What is it and how does it work?

If we believe the words of Jesus that He will be with us when we gather in His name, and if we understand that presence as being the very presence of the Spirit in each one of us, we can draw some conclusions that will clarify what goes on in a shared wisdom model of church.

As we come together as council, board, senate, team, or whatever, the Spirit, in order to share with us the very wisdom of God, promises to each of us a piece of the wisdom. Repeat: a piece! No one can contain all the wisdom of God, for that would be to be God. However, the Spirit desires to share as much of the wisdom as the group can handle at any given time. To do this, different pieces of that wisdom will be given to different folks.

If we could just keep this clear and operative in our behaviours, many difficulties could be avoided. For example, those of us who tend to think that, in fact, we do have all the wisdom would come to recognise the fallacy of our messiahship. In so doing we would relax and learn to really listen to the wisdom of others. And those of us who find it difficult to accept another's idea if it does not at least complement our own thinking would learn to avoid this common scenario:

*I'm listening to Joe speak and I don't especially like or agree with what he is saying, so I find myself thinking, "I wonder why the Spirit isn't talking to Joe."*

Then there are those of us who tend to think that we have little if anything to offer. We would come to trust the value of the wisdom that comes from our own lived experience.

To say that we each have a piece of the wisdom is to say the following:

**1. No one has all the wisdom**

Translate: No one knows everything there is to know, regardless of how educated or uneducated, involved or uninvolved,

experienced or inexperienced, responsible or irresponsible that person happens to be.

**2. Everyone has a different piece**

Translate: Everyone will not agree. In fact, there will be a wide variety of differences and insights

**3. Everyone has some of the wisdom**

Translate: No matter how strange or even "off the wall" a speaker's wisdom may seem, in the midst of it there is something the Spirit is calling the group to consider and, therefore, to listen to, respect, and even treasure.

The bottom line of the philosophy of shared wisdom is a deep and operational faith that the Spirit lives in the group through its membership and speaks through the lived experience of each one. To the degree that the group has both the faith and the skill to surface all the pieces of wisdom that result from this presence of the Spirit, to that degree will the group be able to come up with a decision that reflects the wisdom of the Spirit, the will of God for this group at this time.

Difficult? You bet!

Time consuming? Indeed!

Possible? Not only possible, but at this point in the implementation of the Vatican Council, I see the use of the shared wisdom model as the only way that most of us will ever be able to share decisions in such a way that we create Church!

True, some groups have found ways to retain the basic parliamentary structure while so adapting it as to allow for a great deal of what I call shared wisdom. But in my experience, the learned attitudes and lived experience of this secular model cause it to create unnecessary problems and difficulties. It is out of this experience that I recommend the development of this new model.

This approach to decision making is not new, it has its roots firmly planted in the tradition. In the Acts of the Apostles, we find the story of the Council of Jerusalem. Reading this account, we recognise an approach to decision making that was collaborative. Peter called the assembly together and allowed all the wisdom to surface before making a final pronouncement that obviously was



the result of the shared wisdom and the lived experience of all those involved. Then, as far back as the second century we find an approach to spiritual growth and decision making called discernment. It was recognised as a gift of the Spirit that could be traced through the stories of God's interaction with his people in both the Old and the New Testament.

It is my conviction that the gift of discernment is precisely what we are seeking in our efforts to become decision makers in church. But the tradition is very complicated and deals almost exclusively with the experiences of hermits and cloistered religious in their efforts to discover the will of the Lord in their spiritual journeying. As such, it is impractical and, at first reflection at least, impossible to do for the vast majority of us.

It seems to me, however, that a gift of the Spirit cannot be restricted by lifestyle, social realities, or place in human history. The challenge, then, is to translate the tradition into a workable model of today's church.

The longer I work at this, study the tradition as found in the sources, and continue my prayerful reflection and the dialogue with others who are attempting the model, the clearer it becomes that more than anything else this model is a call to personal holiness out of which can flow the being and building of church. For years I have intuitively defined the call to serve on boards and councils as not just a call to ministry, but also a call to depth spirituality. I have consistently used the phrase "being and building church." It is now becoming clearer and clearer the "to be church" is, in fact, to strive to be holy!

If there is any single position that stands out in the tradition, it is this call to holiness.

There have been two consistent concerns voiced by people who have been attempting to develop this model with me. Be it a parish council, a diocesan staff, a parish or diocesan board, a team, or a religious community, the "worry list" is the same, namely:

1. It takes so much time
2. It is so complicated

Both of these observations tend, indeed, to be true – so true, that one of my major challenges in developing the model is to simplify the process so that it is workable and much less time consuming than people fear it will be or have it to be. Both of these objectives, I believe, are possible.

But the question I raise is even more important to me and needs far greater development if such a model is to become operational. Is it possible that our resistance to this approach to decision making in church has less to do with our concern about time and complicated procedures and more to do with our instinctive fear that the cost of surrendering ourselves to such depth spirituality will be too great? Is it possible that, as ordinary lay people, we find it hard to believe that the Lord would even call us to such holiness? Or, is it, perhaps, that as the spiritual leaders of our people, we are not confident enough of our own holiness, our own ability to lead our people on this radical journey of total surrender to the action of the living God in their lives and in ours?

Before even attempting to reflect on these questions it will be helpful to briefly explore the tradition of discernment in the church. From this exploration and reflection, then, it will be possible to draw some implications for its use in our time, thus making it clearer how such a model of church is a response to the call of the Council and is, in fact, a way to be and to build church in twentieth-century America!

Among the many definitions used for discernment, the most common is: "a graced ability." Ernest Larkin speaks of an experience of the indwelling God, a gift that represents "considerable growth and expertise in the life of the Spirit." (1)

It is quite obvious that we are not considering just a structural process for decision making! What we have in this model is a call that touches life in its deepest and most intimate places. It is a call to be in relationship with the Lord; a call to respond to the Spirit who speaks in our hearts and through our lives; a call to believe in the God of the Gathering, the God who speaks to us in and through one another.



Discernment is a gift, albeit a “neglected gift” according to many scholars. As such we find numerous scriptural passages that refer to this active presence of the Spirit within us – this Spirit who makes it possible for us, and even expected of us, to prophesy and discern not only the presence of God in our lives but also the meaning of that presence.

*For this law that I enjoy on you today is not beyond your strength or beyond your reach. It is not in heaven, so that you need to wonder, “Who will go up to heaven for us and bring it down to us, so that we may hear it and keep it?” Nor is it beyond the seas, so that you need to wonder, “Who will cross the seas for us and bring it back to us, so that we may hear it and keep it?” No, the Word is very near to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart for your observance.*

*Deuteronomy 30:11-14*

*One may have the gift of preaching with wisdom given by the Spirit; another may have the gift of preaching instruction given by the same Spirit; and another the gift of faith given by the same Spirit; ...one, the power of miracles; another, prophecy; another the gift of recognizing spirits; another the gift of tongues and another the ability to interpret them.*

*Corinthians 12:8-10*

*Never try to suppress the Spirit or treat the gift of prophecy with contempt; think before you do anything – hold on to what is good and avoid every form of evil.*

*Thessalonians 5:19-22*

*But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and have all received the knowledge*

*John 2:20*

*But you have not lost the anointing that he gave you, and you do not need anyone to teach you; the anointing He gave teaches you everything; you are anointed with truth, not with a lie, and as it has taught you, so you must stay in Him.*

*John 2:27*

Both scholarly research and prayerful reflection lead us to realise that the gift of discernment is not something given only to a very few. It is not some mysteriously mystic experience or calling. Rather,

“You have been anointed... “it is part of the call to be Christian. It is the result of the presence of the Lord in our lives, the gift of the Spirit given us at baptism. It is a call to holiness.

This call to holiness is, in the final analysis, a call to contemplation. Larkin, in his book *Silent Presence*, says it clearly when he writes:

*Contemplation and personal discernment are recognised today as normal developments in the spiritual life. Both are experiences indwelling God; they are gifts that represent considerable growth and expertise in the life of the Spirit...*

*Contemplation and discernment deal directly with the mysterious, incomprehensible God who appears among us and is experienced in Himself (contemplation) or in a given human situation (discernment). Discernment asks us to be contemplative in action, in our human choices, finding the same God outside who we discover in silent prayer...*

*...discernment should not be regarded as a litmus test, to be applied at key moments of decision. It is spirituality in the concrete, because spirituality is precisely the Spirit acting within us and discernment is the awareness of that action.*

*Spirituality has long suffered from being identified as theory to be applied; it is life first and only then a reflection on life. It is experiencing with understanding and commitment the presence and guidance of God in one’s whole life. That is discernment, too.*

*Discernment is thus a life work. (2)*

It is quite possible to discern the will of God, even with a great deal of clarity, and then say, “No thank you!” Central, then, to this approach to spiritual growth is what is identified in the tradition as interior freedom, purity of heart, indifference, or disinterestedness. This ability to “let go” is critical if the discernor is to be able not only to hear what the Spirit is revealing but also to respond with the appropriate action.

Imperative to the model, then, is the ongoing struggle to “let go” in the sense of allowing God to be God in our lives and in our church. It is this outgrowth of spirituality that seems most clearly to





place the decision-making process in its proper perspective. This part of the tradition will need to be preserved in any adaptation of that tradition. For most of us, “letting go” will probably be a lifelong struggle and challenge! It is never easy to “let go” of our wisdom. It is the unusual person who does not tend to favour his or her own opinions. This is especially true of people who see themselves as having the skills, the experience, and the call to be decision makers!

Yet it is, I believe, precisely this kind of “holy indifference,” this ability to “let go” and seek the will of the Spirit in the gathered wisdom rather than in the wisdom of any one individual, that is the challenge of this model. Just as none of us can be church alone, so none of us can hear the total wisdom of the Spirit alone. We need each other; we need to surrender to the God of the Gathering.