



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

The Process of Sharing Wisdom

What I have come to call the philosophy of shared wisdom is not the same as, but is built upon, the tradition of discernment. I believe this philosophy provides a way to translate that gift of the Spirit and make it available to the church today in the broad setting of shared decision making. I also believe that by taking the essence of the tradition and remolding it, it is possible to make both the experience and the process of sharing wisdom available to ordinary Catholic – lay, religious, or clerical, who know themselves to be called to holiness but are far from the hermit and cloistered religious.

These are the people who struggle with the frustrations they encounter on councils and boards. They are good people who reject the power plays, the infighting that is all too common to our present experience, but who still believe themselves to be called to involvement, responsibility, and commitment. It is for them (and I am one of them) that I attempt to develop this new model.

Attitudinal requirements

Let us first look at the parts of the tradition that it would seem must be kept if the experience and the process are to be recognisable as the gift of discernment given to the church by the Spirit. They are:

1. The sincere desire of those involved to grow in holiness so as to allow the voice of the Spirit to be heard in their lives and in their hearts.
2. The ability to “let go” the “holy indifference” referred to in the tradition, so as to be able to surrender to the voice of the Spirit when it is heard.
3. The inclusion of prayer and solitude in the process, both as preparation for and as integral to the doing of discernment.

4. The guidance of a spiritual leader or pastor to shepherd the discerners through the process.
5. The sharing of all that the Spirit has revealed to each member of the group.
6. The agreement among the members of the group either to work until consensus is reached or to agree with the majority decision.

The reshaping of the tradition will need to include the following differences:

1. The discerners are not committed to a life of desert or cloistered asceticism. They are Christians of goodwill who seek to live in such a way that they are sensitive to the call and the touch of the Spirit in their own lived experience and in the God of the Gathering. They must develop a spirituality that fosters such sensitivity in the context of their lives.
2. What is it to be discerned is not limited to decisions about one’s personal spiritual life or even, strictly speaking, about the spirituality of the group. There will, in fact, be more so-called “secular” areas of concern than those we usually call “spiritual.” A criterion needs to be developed so that groups can determine which issues really call for discernment.
3. The spiritual leader does not need to walk life’s journey with the same degree of intensity and intimacy that the spiritual director of the tradition does. The role of this spiritual leader needs to be defined so that both leader and those led share common expectations.
4. Meetings should not be expected to go on forever, but prayer and solitude are absolutely necessary ingredients of every meeting. Preparation time in advance of each meeting needs to be designed and expected. The meetings need to be so organised that there is time for the reflective silence that enables the Spirit to be heard.
5. Responsibility for group process must be shared by all members, and the role of the leader must be designed so that he or she is clearly an enabler of people and a facilitator of process.



6. A new understanding of majority vote will need to be developed and internalised. It can no longer be the common understanding that the majority has won. Rather, it must reflect the Ignatian insight of the common understanding that the Spirit has been made manifest in the majority and therefore all must accept the decision of the majority as the discerned decision that all now agree to embrace.

Practical implications

Let us now turn to the practical implications that are called for if the tradition is to come alive, if this gift of the Spirit is to be ours!

Any group that is planning to make use of this model of decision making will need to become familiar with the steps involved. There are three basic components:

1. Gathering the data
2. Reflecting prayerfully on the data
3. Sharing the wisdom that results from the reflection

These steps are repeated over and over again, as needed, until the group arrives at a decision that can be accepted gracefully by all the members of the group. This may be a consensus decision or a majority decision that all have agreed to accept as the call of the Spirit.

If the group has more than twenty-five members, it is likely that much of the discerning activity will go on at the committee, commission, or taskforce level rather than within the large group. At least much of the early process will take place in the smaller groups. Any discerned decision, however, must eventually be the total group in that it is the total group who will come to recognise and accept the call of the Spirit.

Let us then examine the three steps and see what is involved in each one.

1. **Gathering the data** - This can be the most time consuming of all the steps. It involves gathering information from the “professionals” and from those to be affected by the possible decision. (Rule of thumb: Those to be affected by your decision have the right to share their wisdom with you before you make the decision.)

2. **Reflecting prayerfully on the data** - This is where analysis and synthesis take place in each person’s understanding of the data. This step involves the effort of each member of the group to reflect on the data in terms of his or her lived experience and insights and to listen to the promptings of the Spirit in the depths of the heart.

3. **Sharing the wisdom** - Having reflected prayerfully and touched one’s own wisdom, each member must now share that wisdom with the total group and listen to all the other members as they share their wisdom. This analysis and synthesis take place in the group thinking. The effort here is again to try to hear the wisdom of the Spirit coming through the wisdom being shared within the group.

When the wisdom is shared, it becomes new data which then needs to be identified, clarified, and nuanced so that the group can reflect on it and then share that reflection. Thus the cycle often needs to be repeated, perhaps many times, before any decision will be made.

Data collection

The process for making a discerned decision, then, starts with the collection of data. Before starting this process, the group must agree on just how much data is needed. Many people find it impossible to discern a decision because they do not have enough information available to them. The reverse problem can also exist. I’ve seen groups become so involved in collecting sufficient data that they never arrive at the decision-making point in the process. To determine the amount of data to be gathered the group must simply agree on how much information is really needed. The amount of professional data required would typically be left to the professionals involved to determine. Input from others can be determined by asking, “Who will be affected by this decision?” and then following the rule of thumb: those to be affected have the right to share their wisdom with you before you make the decision. This does not mean that you must always hear from all those to be affected. Often a representative or random group will prove to be sufficient. If, for example, you are dealing with a major shift in liturgical policy, the question to ask is whether you need to seek the opinions of all parishioners or if a random sampling



will give you basically the same data. Another rule of thumb might be helpful here: If faced with a choice between “too much” or “not enough” input, I would suggest that you choose the “too much” option.

There is also the possibility that a random sampling would give you adequate data but that the people not asked would be less than happy with the fact that their wisdom was not solicited. The decision to survey the total parish might be a sensitive response to the desire of many parishioners to be involved in the life of the parish. All of these possibilities need to be discussed and weighed before the group collecting the data decides how to accomplish this task.

This stage of data gathering is vitally important to the total process and needs to be done by people who have certain skills and are willing to give the kind of time commitment required to do an adequate job. In addition to organisational skills, listening skills are critical to this task. While the temptation here is to split the work up among many people, it is my experience that data collection is often done best by a relatively small taskforce that has more staff people on it than board or council members. Whoever does it and however it is done, if discernment is to be valid, adequate data must be gathered.

The success of this first step of the process will depend not only on how adequate the information is but also on how well the sources of information are identified and how clearly the data is reported back to the discerning group. Simplicity is always the key to success and a great rule to follow.

Reflection on the data

When all necessary data has been gathered, it is given to the decision-making group for prayerful reflection, the second step of the process. The effort here is to study and reflect on the data in terms of one’s own lived experience, praying through feelings, insights, knowledge, and reactions. Out of this prayerful reflection comes each member’s “piece of the wisdom” to be shared with the total group. Keep in mind the importance of scheduling sufficient time between the dissemination of the data and the meeting in which

the wisdom is to be shared. Some people will need many days for reflective thought. Depending on how long and involved the report is, lead time for reflection can vary from five to six days to two weeks or even longer. Again, all of this must be thought through in advance so that a realistic timetable can be planned.

Sharing the wisdom

Now the third step, sharing the wisdom, can take place. There are several ways to design this step. At times, for example, the group may want to deal with the negatives first. Negative attitudes are often generated by fear, misinformation, or simply a lack of information. By dealing with such items first the discerners are able to free their hearts and heads from such negative and binding realities. Once the fears are owned and the information is checked for accuracy, the discerners are ready to move on to the positive concepts, which would allow for greater attentiveness to the Spirit. At other times such an approach just does not match the subject or the need of the group. What is always critical at this point in the process is the honesty of sharing, the openness to hearing one another, and the fostering of the “letting go” attitude. Efforts must be made to listen for trends, similar pieces of wisdom coming from different members, and, especially important, unique concepts and different approaches to the wisdom.

After discussing the wisdom that has been shared, a synthesis is made either by the group leader or by the facilitator working with the group (if there is one). This synthesis then becomes the new data and the group is asked to move back into prayerful reflection. The amount of time needed for this will depend of the amount of data and its complexity. Oftentimes it is clear that there is so much to be sifted through that it cannot be done in a limited period of time. If this is the case, the best approach is to leave the process and plan a time to return to it, possibly at the next scheduled meeting. It is wise to check such a decision with the group members and allow them to decide how much time they need, taking into consideration that a certain amount of compromise may be required.

It is at this point in the discernment that the time factor often becomes the tail that wags the dog! If



people get nervous about the need for a decision, they will tend to truncate the process. This almost may be a situation that calls for an immediate answer or solution. That's Life! But then the group should recognise that and simply agree not to go for discernment but to be satisfied with a majority vote that may or may not be accepted by the minority but will at least provide the temporary decision that is needed. Such a decision might well be brought before the group at a later date for a discerned decision that would be more lasting.

The key here, of course, is good planning. There will be emergencies, but most decisions that will come before a board or a council, a staff or a team, can be foreseen. An important part of annual goal setting is the identification of such areas and issues a year in advance so that meetings can be scheduled and planned accordingly. Groups that consistently find themselves faced with decisions that should have been made yesterday are usually lacking in good planning and goal setting procedures.

We are now in the second round of sharing wisdom. From this, more new data may well result, calling for additional reflection. And so it continues until the facilitator or leader of the group recognises the beginning of a consensus. The indicator of this is that more and more are beginning to come to the same conclusions. At this point a consensus test is appropriate. The clearest way to test the degree of consensus is just to ask the question: "If you were to vote on this issue now, given the ideas and feelings you have all heard from one another and matching that wisdom to your own, how would you vote?" This is not the time for debate or even for explanations of why a person votes one way or another. Just a simple yes or no is all that is required.

Sometimes and wondrously, the very first consensus test reveals that a consensus has been reached! Usually it indicates a future direction. Sometimes it just highlights the wide variety of ideas and directions that are still present in the group. Unless there is, in fact, a consensus, the testing procedures provides new data which then must be discussed and addressed first in the group. Questions like "Can those of you who

'voted' against the issue help the rest of us understand your reasons?" are very helpful. After sufficient discussion the group is now ready to move back into prayer reflection and the cycle continues to repeat itself for as long as is necessary.

It will sometimes happen that the group realises it does not have sufficient information to continue the discernment. For example, let us say that a liturgy team was attempting to discern the possibility of renovating the sanctuary. Its responsibility would be to eventually arrive at a position and a recommendation that could be presented to the parish council for their discernment. As the liturgy committee moves through the various stages of the process, they may come to realise that the financial figures they are dealing with are more guesswork than they are real estimates. There is no way the parish council can continue the discernment without some accurate cost estimates. At this point, then, the process is temporarily discontinued and the additional data is gathered and then presented to the liturgy team for its reflection and discussion. Then the process continues.

Keep in mind that the ultimate goal in all of this is to let the discerning group arrive at a decision with which every member of the group will be able to live gracefully. So as the process continues there must be a balance of the "letting go" attitude with the willingness on the part of each member to speak his or her wisdom. Also, each person must make an effort to listen carefully and respectfully to every other person. A rule of thumb is worth noting: If my piece of the wisdom matches at least one other person's, it is probably important to keep bringing it up for consideration. If, on the other hand, after multiple rounds of the process, I am the only one taking a specific position, chances are that it is time to let go and attempt to listen more attentively to the wisdom of the group.

Spiritual leadership

There is another significant consideration that needs to be explored: the role of the spiritual leader or pastor during this process.

The issue here is whether the leader plays a different role than the other members of the group.



For example, does he or she come to the group with the answer already in place? Is the leader the prophet who calls the group to a prediscerned decision? Or is the leader as much a part of the discernment as other members of the group?

As I understand the tradition, the leader is called to be with the group in the search. The spiritual leader – be that the bishop, pastor, superior, principal, vicar – is called to be “prophet” only in the sense of calling the members of the group to purity of heart that they might pray for light. In this sense the leader assists them in their efforts to get in touch with their own religious experience by faith sharing, and calls them to search in their own hearts for the will of god and the strength and courage to speak that will and to follow it as it emerges in the process. But all the while the leader is to be equally involved in the struggle, the questions, the faith sharing, and the willingness to: “let go” and to follow the guidance of the God of the Gathering!

Relationship of committees to the total group

If the initial discerning has been done by a committee or taskforce or commission, that group will need to prepare its report and recommendations for presentation to the larger group. The smaller group should share as much data as seems necessary and helpful, keeping in mind that all its work should not be repeated by the entire board or council or staff. However, the stages that the discernment went through and the rationale for the first decisions will need to be explained in some detail.

At this point the larger group will have the data it needs to move into prayerful reflection. It will then share the fruits of the reflection which, very often, is to accept the smaller group’s recommendations. This is most apt to happen (1) when the trust level in both groups is high and (2) when the report from the smaller group is thorough and complete.

However, if immediate agreement is not forthcoming, two options are possible. The larger group may decide to repeat the discerning steps, that is, to deal with the data, reflect again, share wisdom, and then continue these steps as often as

is necessary to arrive at a decision. Or, it may decide to return the task to the smaller group and ask it to consider the new data generated by this hesitancy to approve, and to continue the discernment in the smaller group.

Need for a facilitator

One thing is very clear: most groups using this process for the first time will need the assistance of an outside facilitator. How long will this continue to be necessary? It really depends on the group and also on the issue. Some groups will have their own leadership potential to facilitate discernment. Often the spiritual leader will be able to function in this capacity, provided, of course, that he or she has genuinely learned the importance of the “letting go” stance. Even in those situations where such leadership is readily available within the group, some issues just do not lend themselves to internal facilitation. Often the issue will clearly call for someone who has absolute no vested interest in the outcome. Such “hot issues” will be obvious as they arise. A few I can think of that I have facilitated include such things as the renovation of a motherhouse chapel, the possible closing of a parish school, the redesigning of diocesan structures, and the hiring of a principal. Before embarking on a discerning venture, the group must seriously consider what kind of leadership and/or facilitating it will need. I think I can guarantee that any group will need help at least until the members become familiar and comfortable with the process.

Evaluation of each attempt at a discerned decision will also be helpful and will provide an opportunity for the group to grow in its ability to use the model effectively. One of the tasks of the facilitator would be to lead the group in this kind of evaluation. Such an evaluation does not need to be lengthy but it must involve each member of the group. The facilitator would ask two questions: What was helpful/useful/good about the way the group arrived at this decision? What was not helpful/useful/comfortable about this process? All members would be encouraged to respond to each question. A brief discussion of these questions would enhance the process and would improve the members’ participation in the next time it is used.



Key to any group's openness to the Spirit through the process of discernment will be willingness of each member in the group to accept and to surrender to the results of an evaluation.

Attentiveness to the Spirit

For a group to be about communal discernment, each member of the group must be walking with God, that is, committed to an openness to God, a trusting relationship that enables him or her to accept God's providence. The members of the group must also share some commonality in understanding and affirming the goal or mission of the group. And, finally, each member must exhibit a trust and an honesty both in the preparation stage and in the sharing of the wisdom.

As listening to the Spirit in one's own heart and head is key to the preparation stage, so, too, is listening key to the conversation stage. This is the time in the process of discernment when the pieces of the wisdom are gathered by the group from the group. The same criteria that are so central to the shared wisdom model – that is, sharing wisdom, hearing and treasuring wisdom, and creating a climate where these things can really happen – are found in the conversation stage.

There remains one other important learning to be applied to the shared wisdom model. All too often we have thought that if the group did not arrive at a consensus decision, discernment had not really happened. The tradition tells us that this is not necessarily so. The first clear account we have of the use of discernment for a group decision comes to us from Saint Ignatius and his little group of followers. They had to decide if they were going to become an "order" in the church or simply remain just a gathering of men trying to serve the church without any specific structural connection to it. One of the important things they agreed upon as they began their discerning process was that all "with in mind" would embrace the conclusions reached by a majority. It is a matter of history that these men did, in fact, reach a consensus, but it was not their primary aim.

Jules Toner, who has devoted a great deal of study and writing to this topic, explains:

To conclude the reasoning together, it was their intention that all "with one mind" would embrace the conclusions reached by a majority vote. There are a number of things packed into this brief statement. They can be drawn out if we ask: How can they embrace with one mind a conclusion on which they have a split vote?

First, they were ready to accept a conclusion by a simple majority vote, to accept it as that to which God in his infinite goodness had led them as "what the Holy Spirit had inspired." They did not expect unanimity nor demand it as necessary in order to trust their discernment and bring it to satisfactory conclusion.

Rather, they intended that unanimity would follow on the majority vote: all would embrace with one mind the conclusion recommended by a majority vote. Now, to have unanimity is not merely to have volitional consent of the intellectually dissenting minority to do what the majority wants. To have unanimity, the minority must cease to be an intellectually dissenting but volitionally consenting minority; that must now give assent to the majority conclusion as truly expressing the will of God. They must believe it is truly expressing the will of God. They must believe it is truly the right way, not merely the way which is legitimate because of a practical agreement to abide by the majority vote.

This is critical insight. It is also an insight that seems to have great difficulty penetrating our democratic notion of majority vote. Our experience tells us that to vote with the minority is to lose. The magnanimous loser is the one who, nevertheless, goes along with the majority and supports or at least does not block the action that flows from the decision. We call this being a good loser.

True discernment, however, cannot be about winning or losing. So how are we to reconcile a majority vote with an effort to discern? Obviously, a consensus decision is easier to recognise as the call of the Spirit to the group. But it is not a necessary outcome.



The discerning group must agree in advance that they will all be willing to accept the vote of the majority as the will of the Spirit. Let me say it another way: The minority must agree to agree with the majority even though their insights were not the same! Instead of an attitude of “we will do it this way because the majority want it this way,” there will prevail an attitude of “we will do it this way because the Spirit has been heard through the majority.” It is a faith response! And it is made possible by that holy indifference that must be nourished in each discerner.

There will sometimes be a member of the group who simply cannot surrender to the wisdom of the group, cannot believe the voice of God is to be heard in the group decision. Such a person does not experience the peace and contentment and joy that is clearly the experience of the others.

It is important to recognise the pain/or the fear that is operating in such an individual. In no way are we to judge unkindly, to ridicule, or to become impatient with this person. Nor can we allow him or her to keep us from the will of the Spirit as discerned by the group. The group must move on while providing whatever loving support and healing seems appropriate or possible.

Please do not misunderstand what I am trying to say. A general feeling of contentment and peace, that ability to accept the decision gracefully, is, indeed, the indicator of a discerned decision. My only point is that it will not always be a unanimous experience, and I think that is acceptable and not something that should cause us to question the validity of the discernment.

Let us consider a situation in which there has been only a simple or a two-thirds majority. Before that can be declared a discerned decision it needs to be tested in some way. There must be a way of getting a reading from the group on the degree of contentment present. General discontent will lead us to recognise that we have not discerned the will of the Spirit.

I have found two very workable ways to do this, the choice of which depends on the nature of the decision to be made. When the group is seeking to discern a position to be taken on an issue or an

action to be decided upon, I test the degree of consensus at any point in the process by asking, “The direction you are headed is gaining clarity. Is there anyone who cannot live with that direction?” In the early stages of the conversation this question tends to highlight differences, nuance concerns, and generally enrich the sharing of wisdom. It also provides new insights for prayerful consideration and reflection.

But as the process continues and it seem to be evident that the group is now going to reach at least a near consensus, I repeat my question, which becomes, for me, the barometer of when, in fact, the voice of the Spirit has been heard and accepted. General discontent on the part of the minority, will send us back to the process for additional rounds of reflective prayer and wisdom sharing.

When the group is seeking the discernment of group leadership – a major superior or prioress of a community, a chairperson for a board or council, an administrator for a school or department – there is a different way to test the presence of the Lord’s will. Allow me to use an example.

The setting was a parish council of twenty members. In a three-hour process the group had gone from identifying qualities they felt were needed for leadership to naming specific members on the council who had some of those qualities. The council finally agreed on three candidates. After a number of attempts to agree on a candidate, it became clear that one of the three was no longer in the running but that the group was “locked” into a nine-to-eleven vote on the other two. It was time for the test. I asked that every member of the council approach the candidate with the eleven votes (I’ll call her Sally) and tell her if they would be able to accept her leadership and see her as the person designated by the Spirit to be their leader. Before doing that, however, each person was asked to spend fifteen minutes in prayerful reflection. During that time Sally and I prayed together and I explained to her that it was now her responsibility to “discern the discernment.” She was to listen for a sense of more than acceptance of her personally, and to “read” the group in terms of contentment and peace. She was



to ask herself if the group could accept her leadership gracefully.

At the end of those personal encounters, I asked Sally if she would accept the leadership of the council. Her answer was negative and her reason was clear. She explained that there were four members of the group who just could not gracefully accept her leadership. She rightfully saw this as an indicator that a decision had not been discerned.

So, humbly but honestly, we went back to the process. Because the meeting was already running long, the immediate past president of the council agreed to retain his position for another month at least, and another date was scheduled to continue the discernment. In the end, the candidate who, was initially dropped was the one who finally became the chairperson. And the result was a peaceful and joyful acceptance by all members of the council.

There is nothing magical or miraculous about communal discernment! First of all, it is hard work. It takes all we have to give it, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and even physically in terms of endurance. It calls for a great amount of humility and simplicity of heart, a willingness to struggle with oneself and with one another, and, perhaps most importantly, a willingness to grow on the part of everyone involved.