

Communal Discernment Leader's Guide

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When faced with a question or issue, a faith community discerns God's desire and acts accordingly.

Change is a constant in every life and in every community. What is certain is that our God is with us, in us, and working through us.

From the tiniest subatomic particle to the cells in our bodies, from civilizations to the sun, moon, stars, and galaxies, nothing remains as it is, everything is subject to the immutable law of impermanence. So whenever we make a plan and stick to it, at some point we must choose: Either we refuse to acknowledge or accept that radical change has been happening all along, requiring that we adapt to the next right thing, and make changes to our plan or we keep trying to live in a world that no longer exists.

— *A Life of Being, Having, and Doing Enough*,
Wayne Mueller, page 41

What is Communal Discernment?

Simply put, communal discernment is a consensus-building process to help individuals listen for, or discern, what it is God desires from the community of participants. The process allows time and space for silent prayer to allow the Spirit to dwell within the meeting place and guide participants. Communal discernment allows everyone's voice to be heard in a thoughtful, respectful manner.

Communal discernment is contrary to how "business meetings" are typically conducted and may be unfamiliar to many participants. This leader's guide is intended to give you the background information you need to facilitate communal discernment within your congregation. May it help you consider and choose a 2014 health benefit option for your employees in light of the ELCA Philosophy of Benefits' guiding principle that "benefits are an investment in God's ministry carried out through the lives of rostered leaders and lay employees."

Orienting to Communal Discernment

First Steps

To prepare yourself to guide the communal discernment process, consider the following:

- **Learn more about Communal Discernment** — In the video, [Communal Discernment: A Prayerful Practice for Decision Making](#), Pastor Harold Usgaard interviews Pastor Myron Herzberg about how he uses communal discernment to make space for the Spirit to enter the conversation in the congregation he serves. Watch this video to acquaint yourself with the process, and consider sharing it with your congregation. Find the video in the Call to Live Well section at [PorticoBenefits.org](#).
- **Review the communal discernment handout and guidelines** — Become familiar with the process, get a sense of the flow, learn where the spaces are within the process for the Spirit to enter, and where participants can share and grow together. The guidelines are on the reverse side of the handout and also in Appendix A of this leader's guide.
- **Familiarize yourself with the question or concern the congregation is seeking to discern.**
In this instance, you are considering the following:
A guiding principle in the ELCA Philosophy of Benefits is that "benefits are an investment in God's ministry carried out through the lives of rostered leaders and lay employees." How will my congregation make its 2014 health benefit selection given that health benefits support our shared ministry?
- **Get to know the presentation topic** — Visit [PorticoBenefits.org](#) and watch the video, [Healthy Today, Healthy Tomorrow](#). Then familiarize yourself with the 2014 health benefit options.

- **Understand the leader's role** — The leader or facilitator of communal discernment is in charge of two seemingly opposing tasks: To help the group make room for the Spirit to dwell with them, and to monitor the timing of the various agenda items. While they may sound at odds, a skillful facilitator can help make room for the Spirit by assuring those who are more time-focused that they can let go of this awareness because the facilitator is guiding the group through the process. Let the group know you will be ending times of silence with an "Amen" or other gathering phrase, and allow a moment or two for people to be ready to interact with the group.
- **Understand that communal discernment is not a "race to a decision"** — Consensus differs from other forms of group decision-making in that action is not determined by a motion, a second, and a vote. Rather, the group seeks to agree upon the action by including the wisdom of everyone in the group. You'll read more about consensus within this guide.
- **If things begin to feel contentious, take a breather** — Taking a moment of silence or practicing breath prayer can help center the group. They can help redirect the focus from our individual desires and concerns to make space for the Spirit. Take time to regroup and center when it seems appropriate. See Appendix B for a resource on breath prayer.
- **Consider discussing the process first** — If the congregation is unfamiliar with communal discernment, it may be helpful to introduce the process itself at one meeting and then use the process to discuss your health benefit choice at a second meeting. This may help people be more open to the process and allow them to make room for the Spirit to guide them.

Putting It Into Practice

The Communal Discernment Handout

1 Dwell in the Word (about 10 minutes)

- Light a candle in the center of your meeting space and enter into a moment of silence. Reflect on seeing participants through the Light of Christ.
- Listen openly and attentively to Matthew 11:28-30 or Philippians 2:1-11. Be open to stirrings within as the text is read aloud two times. Pause between the two readings and allow a time of silence afterward.

LEADER NOTES

Prayer with the scriptures is an ancient practice that encourages us to listen for God's voice, to God's response to us, and to our questions and concerns. Listeners are invited to be open and attentive to the stirrings within them.

You may use one of these Biblical texts or another text of your choosing to help the group move into an attitude of prayerful listening and reflection.

Read the text aloud two times with a short pause between the two readings. The leader can read or ask for two group members to read the text. Allow 5-10 minutes for the readings and a time of silence. End the silent time with "Amen."

2 Sharing Time (about 20 minutes)

What happened in the prayer time? What part of the text did you spend time with? How does it speak to you and your life? How did God meet you?

LEADER NOTES

Invite sharing about what happened in the prayer time. Explain that the group will practice a prayerful process to help them make a 2014 health benefit selection. Explain that there will be a presentation and they will then be guided through the discernment process.

3 Enter Into a Silent Time of Prayer (about five minutes)

Prayerfully seek wisdom; let go of preconceived options or solutions.

LEADER NOTES

End the silent time with "Amen." Invite sharing about what happened in the prayer time.

4 Listen to the Presentation and Frame the Question for Communal Discernment (about 20 minutes)

Discuss what you noticed and felt in response to the presentation. Share questions of clarification.

LEADER NOTES

Encourage participants to listen to the presentation with open minds and hearts, and not to "formulate rebuttals" while listening. Remind participants that if they are too busy thinking about their response, they can't hear what's being presented.

The presentation is best done by someone who has a good understanding of the question and may have a good grasp of the issues related to the question. To learn about 2014 health benefit options, view the video, [Healthy Today, Healthy Tomorrow](#).

The presenter then focuses the group on the question:

A guiding principle in the ELCA Philosophy of Benefits is that "benefits are an investment in God's ministry carried out through the lives of rostered leaders and lay employees." How will my congregation make its 2014 health benefit selection given that health benefits support our shared ministry?

Putting It Into Practice

5 Discern God’s Desire for Us and Our Community (Time Varies)

- Begin with five minutes of prayerful silence. As you then begin your discussion, listen to the wisdom of everyone in the group. Don’t immediately lean toward one option over the other. Rather take a step back and detach yourself from anything that would color your decision prematurely.
- Rely on God; be open, prayerful, and confident that we can seek God’s will for us and strive to achieve consensus on the question. Check in with participants in the group; be sure all have been given the opportunity to be heard.

LEADER NOTES

Encourage participants to begin with a posture of openness. It’s likely that some are coming with their minds already made up or at least leaning in a particular direction about which health benefit option is appropriate for your congregation.

Why do we have to bother to be prayerfully open to God — or at least try to do so? If we don’t, we do not let the God who is in everything guide us. If we are predisposed to one option, genuine, prayerful discernment is impossible because we cannot be moved nor inspired by the Spirit. When we are already sure of ourselves, there is no gap left, and no space for God’s will to manifest itself.

Compared to traditional decision-making, communal discernment factors in our hope, our desire to be led by the will of God. In decision-making, we are likely to ask questions like “Which is the better option” or “What do I want?” In discernment, the question is more likely to be, “What does God desire for us and for our community?”

Communal discernment begins with this premise: We do not advocate solutions or promote options; we begin by prayerfully seeking wisdom together. This attitude of openness should not be mistaken for apathy or lack of interest. Rather, this is a posture of freedom. It means approaching everything with fresh eyes, confident that God is there. We take a step back and detach ourselves from anything that would color the decision prematurely.

But, we may ask: Is it even possible to approach a decision with no pre-disposition or inclination on the matter? The answer is quite simply “yes,” but it requires some knowledge of this prayer practice. At its core, this prayer practice is about finding God in all things, including all of our decisions. And thus the task of every person is to approach the world with open eyes.

6 Enter Again Into a Silent Time of Prayer (about five minutes)

Prayerfully seek wisdom together; avoid advocating for options or solutions.

LEADER NOTES

End the silent time with “Amen.” Invite sharing about what happened in the prayer time.

7 Determine if There is Consensus (Time Varies)

Share what is noticed; discuss ideas and thoughts, and determine where consensus might be emerging. Test if there is consensus; if there is no consensus, repeat steps 4, 5, and 6.

LEADER NOTES	
<p>Explain that consensus is the hoped for outcome. The goal of this prayerful process is to achieve consensus on the question. Consensus differs from other forms of group decision making in that action is not determined by a motion, a second and a vote. Rather, the group seeks to agree upon the action by including the wisdom of everyone in the group.</p> <div style="text-align: center; margin: 20px 0;"> <pre> graph TD Discussion[Discussion] --> Proposal[Proposal] Proposal --> Test[Test for Consensus] Test -- No --> Concerns[Concerns Raised] Test -- Yes --> Consensus[Consensus Achieved] Stand[Stand Aside] --> Consensus Mod[Modification to Proposal] --> Test Concerns --> Block[Block] Concerns --> Discussion Consensus --> Action[Action Points] </pre> </div> <p>Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consensus_decision-making. Last accessed July 19, 2013.</p>	<p>The one who is leading a communal discernment process makes sure everyone who wants to has the opportunity to speak, make sure everyone who speaks receives respectful attention, and helps to determine when the group is moving toward consensus.</p> <p>Anyone can ask whether the group has achieved consensus, but the leader should pay special attention to this question. Consensus does not necessarily mean that everyone is in full agreement with the proposal. Rather, the question might be something like, "Is this proposal something you can live with?"</p> <p>People who indicate that, while they may not be in full agreement, they can live with the proposal are "standing aside" for the sake of achieving consensus. Those who feel they can't live with the proposal can block it, acknowledging that consensus has not been achieved.</p>

8 If Unable to Reach Consensus During the Meeting Time

The leader may suggest adjourning and establishing a date to continue the communal discernment process.

LEADER NOTES
<p>If there is no consensus on the question, the group can continue to discuss the proposal, modify it, or agree to adjourn and come back to the question at a later date.</p>

Appendix A

Guidelines for Communal Discernment

Maintain an Attitude of Prayerful Listening

- Be still and centered in God's presence
- Don't be afraid to allow periods of silence between questions and comments

Engage in Thoughtful Reflection on the Facts

- Ask questions that are simple and non-directive
- Don't be afraid to ask questions that seem far-fetched. If they arise, they probably need to be asked.
- Gather information and ideas
- Explore practical considerations
- Evaluate the information you have
- Keep the attention on the focal questions

Take Part in Prayerful Deliberation

- Ask open-ended questions (rather than yes/no questions)
- Tap into the imagination and draw upon Scripture. Provide opportunity for reflective responses.
- Look for signs of God. Pay attention to where God seems to be breaking through with love, joy, or compassion.
- Wait for and ask whether there is consensus on the question

Watch for an Emerging Plan of Action

Follow the Spirit's leading in developing a plan of action.

Take Time to Review What You've Experienced of Prayerful Decision Making

Reflect on how it worked in your group and how you might improve it.

- Are you truly listening to each other?
- Does everyone have the opportunity to speak?
- Have you been looking for signs of the Spirit?
- Are you growing closer to God and one another in your time together?

Appendix B

Breath Prayer

Purpose:

To be open and centered.

Suggested Procedure

- 1 Light a candle** if possible. It is a reminder of God's presence with us.
- 2 Create your breath prayer**
 - Recall the phrase, "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10 RSV). Be still, calm, peaceful, and open to the presence of God.
 - Imagine that God is calling you by name. Imagine that God is actually asking, "(Your name), what do you want?" Like the blind man on the road to Jericho, Jesus looks at you with love and asks, "What do you want from me?"
 - Give a simple and direct answer that comes honestly from your heart. Write down the answer. If you have more than one answer, write each of them down. Your answer may be one word such as "peace" or "love" or "help". It may be several words or a phrase such as **feel your presence or lead me into life**. Whatever your answers, they are the foundation of your breath prayer.

- Select the name you are most comfortable using to speak with God. Combine it with your answer to the question, "What do you want?" Some people may have to compose several prayers before they find one that truly reflects their desire. So look carefully at your prayer. Does it reflect the heart of your yearnings and desires? Then this is your prayer.
- Sample Breath Prayers:
 - Jesus/let me feel your love
 - O Lord/show me your way
 - Holy one/heal me
 - I am loved/I am well
 - Lord Jesus/have mercy
 - Holy Wisdom/guide me
 - I am yours/let me feel your presence

3 Practice the breath prayer

Breathe in the first phrase/word and breathe out the second phrase/word. Continue this pattern of breathing and repeating your breath prayer for 5 – 15 minutes.