

Discernment in OD

Rick James (adapted from Ruth Haley Barton)

Every day we make decisions in organisations. Some are small. Others are big. OD processes often involve big decisions about future direction and change. Obviously we bring our God-given intellect and common sense into such processes. But as Christian organisations do we make the effort to really discern God's will for the future? Our own intellect may not be enough. We do not know everything about our own organisation. None of us knows the future. Our guesswork is therefore part of every strategic choice. Our own rational thoughts may well be clouded by our own interests and agendas, whether we are aware of this or not. As Ruth Haley Barton warns 'When we set out to do good, but carry out our attempts without the discipline of attending to our own stuff which lies beneath and opening ourselves up to God's presence, evil is always close at hand'. God declares in Isaiah 55:8 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," - perhaps we should pay a bit more attention to listening to God's thoughts in OD. Perhaps instead of just thinking about what we should do for maximum impact, we should be listening to what we need to do to be obedient living sacrifices?

Discernment is the capacity to recognise and respond to the presence and activity of God both personally and in community.

What process do you have for discerning God's will in significant organisational decisions?

How did Moses do it?

Moses' example and the Exodus story provide a clear example of discernment. Initially when Moses took matters into his own hands and tried to solve things with human strength, he ended up murdering the Egyptian. From that poor start and after 40 years in exile, Moses learnt fairly simple strategy for discernment:

- God spoke to him out of a burning bush and told him what to do
- The Israelites were given direction in where and when to move with the cloud over the tabernacle (Numbers 9 : 17). At the heart of their journey was the ability to be discerning (Deut 1:13)
- Moses leadership strategy was to seek God in solitude and then carry out what God revealed. Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here". (Exodus 33:15)

It is almost never as clear for Christian organisations today. We do not have clouds and pillars of fire. We have to rely on the more subtle dynamics of the Holy Spirit witnessing with the human spirit about things that are true (Rom 8:16). But as Ruth Haley Barton again says: 'The greater the call for decisive action, the more we must be sure we have waited long enough to receive clear direction'.

How do we do discernment?

Most Christian organisations do not do discernment particularly well. We tend not to do it as a formal intentional process. It therefore tends to get lost in the relentless busyness of most organisations. At best it becomes a perfunctory opening prayer at the beginning of a meeting, which requires little engagement by the group except to murmur 'amen'. We tend to be locked into an analytical mode. Most of us, including me, find it incredibly challenging to move beyond our intellect. Yet to really discern we have to reach a place of deep listening and response to the spirit of God within us and among us.

It is one thing to rely on what feels like a subjective approach for our personal life, it feels much riskier to do when it involves the lives of other people and even their jobs. We have to be very careful to avoid manipulation. It is vital that in such processes, one person does not pronounce the will of God for another or for the leadership to impose their will as a divine prerogative. This is why discernment in organisations should be a communal process.

Is there a trustworthy process for organisational discernment?

A trustworthy discernment process

Ruth Haley Barton in her excellent book, 'Strengthening the Soul of your Leadership' makes some very sensible, spiritual and practical suggestions:

Preparation

As with many change processes, it is really useful to clarify the question you are asking God about. Often there are several questions which can be confusing. But what is the deeper question here? It is also essential to involve the right people - not just the boards or leaders, but also others who have gift of wisdom and discernment. Barton suggests finding a facilitator - someone who does not have a vested interest in any particular outcome and is able to listen prayerfully, call for silence as needed, guide the process, comment at different points regarding what they are hearing and how they think the spirit might be moving in the group. She also emphasises the importance of establishing guiding values and principles right at the start.

Prayer

Prayer is embedded throughout the process, perhaps starting with a prayer of quiet trust and asking for wisdom (Psalm 131 or James 1:5). Those who favour liturgy might like the Book of Common Prayer:

Oh God, by whom we are guided in judgement,
And who raises up for us light in the darkness:
Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties,
The grace to ask what you would have us do;
That your spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices,
And in your straight path we may not stumble;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord
Amen

Letting go

In order to discern God's voice, we need to silence our own. We need to become indifferent to our ego, prestige, organisational politics, personal comfort, pet projects, even what others think of us. If we are more aware of it, we are more likely to be able to manage it consciously rather than let it manage us subconsciously. If we are not, at least, honest about the fact that we are not indifferent then the discernment process becomes little more than a rigged election. It is worth asking the group individually:

- What interests, hurts, needs, self-centred desires do I bring into this situation?
- Can I lay them down before God?

And then getting people to find someone to discuss and then pray with.

Listening process

Discernment is a major commitment to listening with love and attention to our experiences, to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit, to Scripture and Christian tradition, to dreams and visions, to pertinent facts and information, to those who will be affected most deeply by our decisions...

Any discernment process is about listening. I have seen this listening process last from a few minutes to six months. It may be worth listening to as many people as possible (such as those who will be most affected by the change or those on the margins with the smallest voices). But as well as listening to other people, it is about making space to listen to God. Silence can help us cease striving and rest in God.

Selecting an option

After all the listening, we need to select an option that seems consistent with what God is doing among you. It may be about asking:

- Where does God's spirit seem to rest (much more than surface emotion)
- What feels closest to God's will?
- Given the current situation, what will allow the individual, team, organisation to best live out that unique calling?

At the end of that to decide: "To the best of our ability we agree that this particular path is God's will for us, so this is the direction we will go".

It may be worth giving people some space after this to seek inner confirmation.

Making it happen

Once you have decided, then the real work starts... Implementing change of any kind is rarely smooth or painless. We can be assured of God's continued presence, not just in decision-making, but through the valleys and up the hills of 'making it happen'.