

SENSEMAKING, DISCERNMENT, AND RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

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Why does leading a religious organization (or any organization) seem so difficult? Why is it so difficult to get decisions made and implemented by a group or in an organization? Why is it that as soon as a problem seems solved, it becomes unsolved? Why is it (even though we pray about it every day) so difficult to lead our organization congruently with our faith, our principles, and our beliefs? What is so difficult about ensuring that faith infuses all organizational activities?¹

In this paper, we propose that a thorough grasp of a concept from organizational psychology, Karl Weick's "sensemaking," can assist religious leaders in negotiating the difficulties of collective understanding, decision making, and action. In the second section of the paper, we show that the developers and practitioners of collective Christian discernment - a collection of methods that have as their goal seeking the will of God² - seem to have implicitly designed their techniques to address the difficulties of sensemaking in their spiritual discernment processes. We also propose that the careful addition of the social science model of Weick's sensemaking, and possibly other relevant descriptive social science models, to discernment techniques, tools and concepts can assist religious leaders in their goal of leading with God's will.

We are careful to distinguish techniques from spiritual gifts, prayer, and listening for God. We do not propose that the social science model of sensemaking is religious,

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¹ Thomas H. Jeavons, *When the Bottom Line is Faithfulness: The Management of Christian Service Organizations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). Thomas H. Jeavons & Rebekah Burch Basinger, *Growing Givers' Hearts: Treating Fundraising as Ministry* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000). These two books are excellent sources for principles and examples indicating how a faith-based organization can and must integrate faith with goals.

² Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Publications: 1997), 45.

Christian, or value-neutral; we claim instead that sensemaking is a descriptive model of what people do, and that understanding the implications of the model and using techniques that take into account the implications of the model can lead to improved discernment. Religious discernment scholars and practitioners agree that what matters in discernment is what Ackerman calls attitude towards God,³ what the Jesuits consider the “standard of judgment: all for the greater glory of God,”⁴ and that “seeking God’s will is the ultimate value in our knowledge and experience.”⁵ The tools and techniques, developed with human wisdom, while from God, are only as good as the intent and purposes to which they are put.

WHY SENSEMAKING?

Why, of all the descriptive social science models that we could apply to religious organizations, do we choose sensemaking? We give two answers here. The first is descriptive and autobiographical; the second is our attempt to explain how we see the underlying compatibility.

Both authors of the present article went into their doctoral work having studied theology. Each of them had the experience in their graduate work that their understanding of theological ways of thinking facilitated their understanding of Weick. Others on the *Journal of Religious Leadership’s* Editorial Board had similar experiences.⁶ We realized that while religion helps us understand the meaning of life, Weick’s work tries to explain how we generate meaning. For those in ministry at the individual or congregational level, those involved in forming and sustaining clergy and others who minister, and those who guide people in their lives and careers, Weick’s sensemaking can be illuminating.

³ John Ackerman, *Spiritual Awakening: A Guide to Spiritual Life in the Congregation* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1994), 16.

⁴ Claire E. Wolfteich, *American Catholics Through the Twentieth Century: Spirituality, Lay Experience, and Public Life* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 2001), 164.

⁵ Morris & Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will*, 41.

⁶ We thank Scott Cormode and David Forney of the Board of *JRL* for encouraging us in this work.

In this paper, we show how Weick's sensemaking, a description of what happens as people make sense in a collective situation, is compatible with Christian spiritual discernment methods. We propose that it can offer a fresh perspective on collective discernment. We also propose that certain descriptive social science models, particularly those that share an underlying value with religion - such as finding meaning - can be helpfully applied prescriptively to religious situations. This paper integrates wisdom from organizational psychology (Weick) and from various religious traditions of discernment (Anabaptist, Society of Friends, Protestant, and Roman Catholic) to better understand how collective understanding and action can be prayerfully attained.⁷

THE PROBLEM OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

Although it sometimes seems as though it would be more efficient and maybe even more effective to have a single person make decisions - especially just after a particularly frustrating committee meeting - group decision making is generally a more effective approach for those who have to live with the consequences of the decision or who will have a role in implementing it. However, once more than one person is involved, acting and understanding become complex. We know, for example, that in any interaction between two people, each person is likely to bring different expectations, past experiences, opinions, preferences, levels of attention, preferred modes of reasoning, and a whole host of other factors that can thwart mutual understanding and derail any possibility of coming to a mutual decision. Of course, the situation increases in complexity when more than two people are involved, and a group must come to a decision or take collective action.

In religious leadership, the fields of practical theology and pastoral care have paid careful attention to these concerns.⁸

⁷ We include an annotated list from different Christian traditions of readings we have found helpful at the end of this paper. It is not meant to be exhaustive of the literature.

⁸ See Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Pastoral Theology as Public Theology: Revolutions in the 'Fourth Area,'" in *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*, ed. Nancy Ramsay, 45-64 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), and Emmanuel L. Lartey, "Globalization, Internationalization, and Indigenization of Pastoral Care and Counseling," in Ramsay, *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*, 87-108. Miller-McLemore gives a concise history of

Despite these attempts, theorists and practitioners often analyze decision-making and other leadership scenarios (1) as though all people involved perceive the situation through a single lens or (2) as though there were one right way to perceive the situation. This is not surprising: it is difficult to contemplate the multiple, shifting perspectives present in any group situation and even more complicated to assess their effects on each other. To help us (the authors) keep in mind how multiple perspectives operate in a group situation, we employ the seven properties of Karl Weick's sensemaking,⁹ a concept that has helped us to understand and explain situations. It can also aid organizational theorists and practitioners in designing mechanisms that can mitigate the barriers to and facilitate the process of collective decision-making. In the second section of this paper, in our discussion of writers on Christian discernment, we will illustrate mechanisms designed explicitly for Christian community decision-making (discernment) that seem to draw implicitly on sensemaking.

DEFINING SENSEMAKING

Sensemaking refers to what goes on as a group comes to understandings of what happens in their midst. We contrast this definition with commonsense, organizational, or social psychological usage that equates sensemaking with individual perception or individual interpretation. A person's perception or interpretation of an event is merely one part of sensemaking, and should not be used in the present context to describe sensemaking as a whole. Sensemaking, as Weick defines it, is collective. Sensemaking is a generic, natural, process by which two or more individuals assign meaning to a situation or event. Note that Weick is not being prescriptive. His purpose is to illuminate what happens when people within a group try to interpret a group context.

We can contrast sensemaking with other more purposive ways of understanding situations and events. For example, a

pastoral theology and the trends behind public theology, including the evolution and differentiation of the term "practical theology" primarily in the U.S. while Lartey offers a global perspective.

⁹ Karl E. Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995).

positivistic description of an observed situation might yield the following:

- (1) The observer(s) strives to remain as objective and detached as possible so that an unbiased analysis can be made. The observer(s) follows procedures and puts protocols in place so that feelings, thoughts, and actions do not affect the situation, and the observer(s) tries to keep personal feelings from affecting analysis.
- (2) The observer(s) alone defines what the situation is, determining when it begins and when it ends.
- (3) Accurate descriptions of events and situations are the most important goal.

The primary goal of Weick's sensemaking is not to achieve an ideal, such as positivistic accuracy of facts; rather, sensemaking focuses on how people understand in collective settings. The emphasis is upon describing the process of sensemaking rather than the content of the "sense" that people make. Weick's interest (and the interest of the researchers upon whom he draws) is not normative. He does not prescribe how they should behave. Instead, he describes what people actually do in a given situation. Weick is able to give religious leaders and teachers of leadership a sensemaking lens that challenges some of our rational assumptions about how people behave in organizations.

In describing sensemaking, we attempt to observe what happens in the group as participants make sense of a situation. When we later talk about religious discernment, we will see how classic methods of spiritual discernment take into consideration the difficulties of sensemaking.

Weick specifies seven properties of sensemaking.¹⁰ We describe them below and then give an example.

1. Sensemaking happens in the presence of others. That is, it is by definition a collective or social action. It assumes that potential audiences, those who might observe a person's action and cause some consequence to that person, can affect how the person engages the situation.

¹⁰ Weick, *Sensemaking*, 17 ff.

2. Each individual's sense of personal identity can be changed by what he/she learns; therefore, the sensemaking process will affect the personal identity of the sensemakers.

3. The situations, events, or behavior in question have already happened; therefore, sensemaking is retrospective; that is, we make sense of the past.

4. Sensemaking is done on extracted or salient cues.

5. When we walk into a situation that seems new to us, we must remember that it has a history and that we bring a history into the situation. Weick reminds us that the social situations we make sense of are on-going processes, and that our definitions of when they begin and end are part of our enactment. (see 7 below)

6. On the whole, sensemaking drives us to plausible rather than accurate explanations. Although in U.S. culture (and in contrast to many other cultures) we often value accurate explanations, we settle for plausible explanations in many sensemaking situations. If it sounds as though it could have happened a certain way, we assume it probably did.¹¹

7. A person extracts particular cues from an on-going flow for closer attention. By acting, and speaking is an action, people produce part of the environment they face. Weick calls the creation of part of the environment "enactment."

Consider this opportunity for sensemaking from one congregation:

The choir had finished their songs long before Communion ended, so each time the doors of the church opened, everyone in the congregation could hear people walking along the hallway that led to the parking lot.

¹¹ Note again that this is a description of what happens in collective situations. We will talk later about applying sensemaking to a practical context. Weick and Sutcliffe have done this in a business context with their book, Karl E. Weick and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe, *Managing the Unexpected: Assuring High Performance in an Age of Complexity* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2001).

Father Q., annoyed by those skipping the final prayers, abruptly halted the distribution of Communion to intone, “*Listen* to the *sound* of the *heels* leaving.”

If we rely on one observer’s report of the following Sunday, we have some idea of the congregation’s sensemaking (*sensemaking properties are in italics*):

Father Q., in a social context (Sunday worship), extracted particular cues from on-going processes by his comment. [We are still worshipping; some “feet” are leaving.]

Father. Q. also *enacted a meaning* for his congregation [disdain toward those leaving early] by his tone. By the following Sunday, word had gotten around (“Did Father Q. really call ‘those people’ heels?”).

At least some people must have reconsidered their reasons for leaving early [*retrospective sensemaking*] and chosen not to be linked [*personal identity*] with “heels” since that Sunday no one left the service before the final benediction.

Note that this is a *plausible explanation* that was not verified: no one ever talked to Father Q. or the people who had left early the first week to verify their versions of events.

APPLYING SENSEMAKING: DEALING WITH THE UNEXPECTED

“One of the greatest challenges any...organization faces is dealing with the unexpected.”¹² Our experience tells us this is the case in religious as well as secular organizations. We run into difficulties interpreting situations and then taking action (making decisions) based on our interpretations when we assume everyone shares our assumptions since that is when the unexpected often occurs. Religious and cultural ceremonies such as weddings provide a lot of room for the unexpected. Notice, in the religious wedding ceremony

¹² Weick and Sutcliffe, *Managing the Unexpected*, 1. Note that one word has been removed from the quotation: that word is business. Weick and Sutcliffe’s book was written as part of a business school series, but their warning applies to any organization, business or not. We adopt it here as we apply some of the lessons they have taught us to religious leadership.

described below (and in the one following) the difficulties of sensemaking:

The June afternoon was warm for New England, and wedding guests in formal clothes sweltered as they sat in chairs in neat rows under the tent in the backyard garden of the bridal couple's close friends. The bride and groom, with their priest, stood a few yards from the tent under the shade of a large tree. Other guests, many of them members of the bridal couple's families seemed to be dressed casually and were wandering around the backyard, talking with each other, catching up on family gossip, and drinking cool drinks. The children were running around shouting and playing, and their parents seemed to be ignoring them. The priest chanted quietly in a language that seemed foreign to everyone. He occasionally called for a response from the bride and groom or their parents. The overheated guests perspired under the tent, getting obviously annoyed, and the whispering started: Why were all these people, members of the family, acting so disrespectfully and "ruining the wedding?"

What we have described was an Indian Hindu wedding that took place in the backyard of friends of the bride and groom, a non-Indian New England couple. The "host and hostess" were perplexed that family members were inattentive and did not sit in the designated "wedding ceremony area." The "Indians," including the bridal couple, their parents, their extended families, and the priest, seemed unaware that there was any problem.

The "New Englanders" did not realize that Hindu weddings are typically long (sometimes lasting for days) and that guests expect that the Sanskrit-chanting priest would call for everyone's attention at the auspicious moment. Guests at a Hindu wedding are not expected to pay attention to the wedding party's every word and action or to sit uncomfortably in the hot sun under the tent through the ceremony, and it would be ridiculous to expect small children to sit quietly! It was appropriate for guests to do what the family was doing: get up, get a cool drink, socialize, and relax.

Finally, two in-laws, Christians who were not Indian but who had recently married into one of the Hindu families and had negotiated the American/Indian and Hindu/Christian wedding differences, realized what was happening and

walked up the aisle assuring the “New Englanders,” including the host and hostess, that the wedding was proceeding as expected and that they should all get up, get something cool to drink, and join the other family members in the shade.

Because people were from different cultures and religions with little knowledge of each other’s customs, sensemaking was complicated, and there was little chance to get accurate information. The ambiguity regarding the answer to the question - Who were the hosts - added to the confusion. The wedding was held at the friends’ house: If they are the hosts and they see something going “wrong” at a celebration at their house, should they intervene? They were unfamiliar with Hindu customs, they did not know family members other than the bride and groom, and they could not consult the bridal couple or their parents, who were busy with the ceremony and not available for host duties or to clear up confusion. We might further think about how sensemaking would have occurred if there had been no boundary spanners (people with knowledge of the multiple sets of cultures and customs present): How could the sensemaking have played out differently?

Lest the above example make us too complacent, we suggest another example, closer to home, to remind ourselves that even when everyone is from the same culture (religion, family), people can have different expectations depending on their own prior or local experiences. That is, it can be very embarrassing to find yourself the only one hooting and clapping as the pastor introduces the newly married couple to the congregation after a very solemn wedding (as is always done in your congregation at weddings, baptisms, and introduction of new members to the community) as the other members of the wedding party back away from you and everyone else glares at you silently!

Knowing that understandings and practices differ, even among their own churches, religious leaders play an important role in enacting broader understandings in group contexts and offering meaningful interpretations. Describing procedures and their spiritual, ritual, or traditional meanings (and also what is not to be done) not only enact meanings for the group but can also help avoid embarrassment for more exuberant participants.

IMPLICATIONS OF SENSEMAKING

Each of the seven properties of sensemaking has implications for how the process can happen. Different people in any group notice some things and not others or extract some cues and not others. A dominant person or group may be able to make particular cues salient and enact a particular understanding. People bring different thoughts, feelings, knowledge, abilities, and experiences to the situation and each are affected by what happens based on what they bring to the situation. Finally, if something unexpected happens, people are more likely to construct a plausible scenario to explain what happened. Weick helps us to understand the seven properties of sensemaking by enacting the recipe: "How can I know what I think or feel until I see what I say and do?"¹³

When people enact this recipe, they are affected by

- (1) social context (what I say and do is affected by the audience that I anticipate will audit the conclusions I reach);
- (2) identity (the recipe is focused on the question of who I am, the answer to which lies partly in what my words and deeds reveal about what I think and feel);
- (3) retrospect (to learn what I think and feel, I look back over what I said and did);
- (4) cues (what I single out from what I say and do is only a small portion of all possible things I might notice);
- (5) ongoing flows (my talk and action are spread across time, which means my interests early in the scanning may change by time the scanning concludes);
- (6) plausibility (I need to know enough about what I think to keep my project going)

¹³ Bracketing and formatting added.

- (7) enactment (the whole recipe works only if I produce some object in the first place that can be scrutinized for possible thoughts and feelings[.]”¹⁴

While Karl Weick’s sensemaking does not have overt spiritual or religious aspects to it, sensemaking does have some features that parallel the instructions of spiritual masters. We see the same careful attention to how people try to make sense of their intellect, affect, and values and to negotiating the difficulties of attention, perception, history, and identity during collective sensemaking that we see in the instructions of expert spiritual discernment teachers. In the next section, we will discuss collective religious discernment and show the ways in which some scholars and practitioners of Christian discernment seem to have implicitly attempted to take into account sensemaking in their discernment processes.

COLLECTIVE DISCERNMENT: UNDERSTANDING AND DECISION MAKING

What is spiritual discernment? Origen, the Desert Elders, and many of the saints have been concerned with spiritual discernment. Scholar Mark A. McIntosh tells us that Christian spiritual discerners are all asking: “[H]ow do we know what we think we know[?]”¹⁵ While there is consensus regarding the goal of Christian discernment, there are differences among Christian traditions in their practices as they seek to understand how they know.

Practical theological Claire Wolfeich writes, “Discernment is the process whereby one prayerfully seeks to become more free from distorting perspectives and thus more able to glimpse what is good, to glimpse the will of God.”¹⁶ Morris and Olsen, concur, “The purpose and goal of spiritual

¹⁴ Karl E. Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 461-463.

¹⁵ Mark A. McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), xiii.

¹⁶ Claire E. Wolfeich, *Navigating New Terrain: Work and Women’s Spiritual Lives* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), 105. Wolfeich’s work is primarily about Catholics, but she also integrates Protestant sources into her work.

discernment is knowing and doing God's will."¹⁷ Anabaptist, Protestant, Quaker, and Roman Catholic authors state that the goal of discernment is to find God's will; they also agree that the process is difficult and that it is difficult to know when one has an answer. In fact, many of the scholarly writings on spiritual discernment are devoted to refining methods of understanding or to understanding methods that have been codified. Oswald and Friedrich warn us that discernment is not the same as decision-making, and should not be equated with any particular form (e.g., consensus) of decision-making.¹⁸ Pierre Wolff tells us directly, "Thus, discernment is a process leading to a decision."¹⁹ Note that what they agree on is that discernment is the process of determining God's will, and that it is not equated with or reduced to any particular form of decision making. In fact, a number of different forms of decision making could be consistent with discernment.

While different traditions agree on the goal of discernment, they disagree on techniques and methods. For example, while the Ignatian method draws on both intellect and affectivity, some teachers, notably, Calvin, distrusted reason in religious decision making.²⁰ Some of the differences are, of course, historically based, being reactions to abuses or extremism in one direction or another (e.g., focused on intellect or emotion).

Some scholars emphasize contemplative prayer, making time to listen to God rather than prayers of thanksgiving and petition, while others say that discernment should include both contemplative (apophatic) and petitionary (kataphatic)

¹⁷ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will*, 51. In their Appendix, Morris and Olsen, both Protestants, summarize spiritual discernment models from Anabaptist (Brethren, Mennonite, Free Churches), Baptist, United Church of Christ (Congregational), Eastern Orthodox, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist and Wesleyan, Nazarene, Pentecostal, Presbyterian and Reformed, Friends (Quakers), Roman Catholic (including Augustinian, Benedictine, Franciscan, Dominican, Jesuit, and sacramental sources) and briefly describe identifying characteristics of each (126-130). The first two chapters of the book also contain brief discussion of some of these traditions.

¹⁸ Roy M. Oswald and Robert E. Friedrich, Jr., *Discerning Your Congregation's Future: A Strategic and Spiritual Approach* (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 1996), 6.

¹⁹ Pierre Wolff, *Discernment: The Art of Choosing Well*, rev. ed. (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 2003), 11.

²⁰ Wolfeich, *American Catholics*, 162.

prayer. They reason that the danger of using only petitionary and thanksgiving prayer is that we will miss out on listening to God while the danger of using only contemplative prayer is that we might be too passive and not bring our concerns to God.²¹ Richard Foster integrates methods of spiritual formation and discernment and includes inward disciplines (meditation, prayer, fasting and study), outward disciplines (simplicity, solitude, submission and service), and corporate disciplines (confession, worship, guidance, and celebration), all of which are necessary.²²

SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT AND SENSEMAKING

While all the works on spiritual discernment we reviewed indicated that the participants in communal discernment should have some knowledge, experience, and/or formation in individual discernment, there were wide differences in practices, depending on the tradition, the purpose of the collective discernment, the method used, and perhaps other factors as well. For example, Olsen and Morseth, in their book, *Selecting Church Leaders: A Practice in Spiritual Discernment*,²³ suggest that all members of selection teams, search groups, and nominating committees go through a conversion and formation process as the group makes their discernment. The authors do not seem to require prior experience, but seek to make formation in discernment part of the process of being on a committee to select leaders. Ignatian discernment, by contrast, goes to the other extreme. Pierre Wolff states, "A communal discernment deserves to be qualified as discernment only if each member of the group has acquired through practice the capacity of discerning personally. If that condition is not fulfilled, a group can still make decisions, but it would be better not to call the process 'discernment'...[because] they cannot expect to get the guarantees of discernment."²⁴ These differences are probably not as large as they may seem since some of the differences

²¹ Oswald & Friedrich, *Discerning Your Congregation's Future*, xvi.

²² Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

²³ Charles M. Olsen and Ellen Morseth, *Selecting Church Leaders: A Practice in Spiritual Discernment* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2002).

²⁴ Wolff, *Discernment*, 92-93.

may lie in the different kinds of discernments the authors are writing about.

As we worked through the characteristics of sensemaking and of spiritual discernment, we were struck by the parallels we found between sensemaking and by those practicing corporate religious discernment. *Specifically, those who practice spiritual discernment in the group context seem to implicitly understand and seek to create conditions that are maximally beneficial for their objective given what we know happens in groups according to Weick's sensemaking.* Perhaps sensemaking can give us an additional set of tools or another perspective for understanding, apprehending, and making sense of organizational life in religious contexts.

Spiritual discernment is seen as an antidote to both the strictly rational and purely emotional processes that could otherwise be used to make collective decisions. "Spiritual discernment is not a process in which one suspends reason. Rather, faith must be understood as engaging and directing practical reason."²⁵ "...[T]he exercise of reason here is a spiritual practice."²⁶ Wolff defines Ignatian discernment: "Influenced by our values [in spiritual discernment, illumed by faith], we work with our intellect and our affectivity in order to determine, in time, our decision."²⁷ Wolff has described a communal discernment procedure used by Ignatius and his original band of followers for deciding whether they should remain bound together in a group and also whether they should become a religious order.²⁸ He notes four considerations to be kept in mind and warns that "ignoring them may damage and any attempt to practice communal discernment."²⁹ In designing processes and procedures for discernment, we have said that discernment scholars seemed instinctively wise to what others of us have learned through Weick's sensemaking. Here are some of Weick's thoughts about sensemaking paralleled with Wolff's instructions of conditions necessary for communal discernment.

²⁵ Wolfteich, *American Catholics*, 165.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.

²⁷ Wolff, *Discernment*, 7.

²⁸ Wolff notes that the narrative of this discernment can be found in English translation at: Jules J. Toner, "The Deliberation that Started the Jesuits," *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits* 4, (June 1974).

²⁹ Wolff, *Discernment*, 89-92.

Weick warns us, contradicting other theorists who write about sensemaking, that when sensemaking is used as a belief-driven process, it will not be neat and tidy, and that we are more likely to see “divergent, antagonistic, and imbalanced forces woven throughout acts of sensemaking.”³⁰

Wolff cautions us to realize that even under the best circumstances with the best intentions, communal discernment will be difficult and bring forth tensions and conflicts. It did for the Apostles just after Pentecost, and it will for us.

Weick shows us that because plausible accounts are constructed more readily than accurate accounts, we should be suspicious of quick agreement and continue to expose disagreements, manipulations, coercions, or other issues that need to be worked through.

Wolff tells us the group should be suspicious if unanimity comes too quickly. Easy agreement could mean that something was overlooked, that some were lazy, that some felt manipulated or were too obedient. Wolff suggests holding aside the unanimity and going back in the discernment process.

In talking about the retrospective nature of sensemaking, **Weick** warns us: “The problem is that there are too many meanings, not too few.... The problem is confusion, not ignorance.”³¹ By working from the same belief, creed, or value, and acknowledging that people are complicated and have other parts to their lives (Wolff), we help to address the problem of too many meanings.

Wolff instructs us that the communally discerning group must have the same starting point: a belief, creed, value; and they must mean the same thing by the words they use to express that starting point. To do this we must remember that each person is part of several wholes, and that in any group each should take into account other sectors of their lives and allow for others to do the same.

Weick's sensemaking, a communal activity, will be affected by the individual perceptual skills and sophistication of the individuals involved.

³⁰ Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations*, 136.

³¹ Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations*, 27.

Wolff insists that all participants in communal discernment must be capable of personal discernment.

THE IGNATION DISCERNMENT PROCESS

The process may proceed by any of a number of methods for bringing forward alternatives and then screening them for indifference. Prayer, asking specifically for indifference, light, and strength to deal with the results of the common decision always accompanies every part of the process.³² Morris and Olsen remind us that when speaking of discernment, indifference does not mean a person is indifferent or uninterested. Instead indifference is a technical term in spiritual discernment. Indifference occurs when members of the group have given up their personal agendas.³³

Generally, in traditional Ignatian discernment, the group members are not allowed to communicate with each other so they do not, intentionally or unintentionally, pressure each other, and in the case of Ignatius and his followers, no outsiders were used to facilitate the process. When the ten people who began the Jesuit religious order were trying to decide (1) whether they should be bound to each other and (2) whether they should become a religious order, they made their personal discernments, then they informed each other that they were ready, and each one presented only his reasons against the decision - the cons - to the others. Then, after a few days of solitary prayer and examination (as in personal discernment),³⁴ each one presented his reasons for the decision-the pros. Wolff tells us "They repeated the process until they came to a decision."³⁵ It took almost three months.

The psychology of this process recognizes that sensemaking in the presence of others (potential audiences) can be alienating and threaten identity, and a method such as the Ignatian method that minimizes the chance of these threats facilitates participants being open to God in their decision-making. Wolff mentions that decisions can be difficult for people because they can lead to loss of relationships,

³² Wolff, *Discernment*, 91-99.

³³ *Ibid.*, 76

³⁴ Thomas H. Green, S.J. *Weeds Among the Wheat: Discernment: Where Prayer and Action Meet* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1984), 180.

reputation, or even life.³⁶ By having everyone in one meeting present their reasons against the proposition, all are joined in the endeavor. By then having all present their reasons for the proposition in the next meeting, all are again joined in the endeavor. The very factors that make it difficult to be public within a group are blunted. It also allows personal identity to change over the course of the decision making process without embarrassment. The process provides cues, makes sense of the past, and allows decision making to be a “place arrived” at the end of a journey rather than a one-time event. A sensemaking perspective alerts us to the difficulties of communal discernment and reminds us to rely on processes that preserve people’s dignity and safety and allow personal identities to grow and be shaped by the process.

Once participants have come to a decision, the process is not finished. Ignatian discernment also requires that the individuals take the decision back to their hearts in prayer to see whether their reactions are desolation or consolation.³⁷ This can be a lengthy task that causes the participants to begin the discernment process over again. Notice here the parallel to Weick’s sensemaking.

IGNATIAN

SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

WEICK’S SENSEMAKING

Individuals take the decision back to their hearts in prayer to see whether their reactions are desolation or consolation.

The decision is created “that can be scrutinized for possible thoughts and feelings.”

LEADING WITH A SENSEMAKING APPROACH

Using a sensemaking approach makes a person more aware of dynamics that happen in every social context, and this awareness can be crucial in organizations where carrying out the mission is complicated because the organization has, at minimum, a double-bottom line. Many non-profit organizations, including most religious organizations, fit this

³⁵ Wolff, Discernment, 102.

³⁶ Ibid., 98-99.

³⁷ Ibid., 35-55. Wolff titles this chapter, “How to Listen to My Heart.”

category: To be effective means (1) to carry out their primary mission (2) to operate with a second mission that is not secondary.

The challenge of grappling with the contradictions and seeming paradoxes inherent in working with a double bottom line is examined from the perspective of faith in two excellent books, *When the Bottom Line is Faithfulness: The Management of Christian Service Organizations*³⁸ and in *Growing Givers' Hearts: Treating Fundraising as Ministry*.³⁹ It should not surprise us to learn that in addition to being trained in management and fundraising, the authors of these two books are a Quaker and an Anabaptist (Mennonite), two traditions with well-developed practices of spiritual discernment. The use of the sensemaking framework provides a complementary lens through which to view *organizational action* to Jeavons' and Basinger's work on the *actions of religious leaders*. We propose that attention to sensemaking processes not only allows but requires that the second bottom line, in this case, the theological content and practical content, be embedded in the theorizing, theologizing, and living of the life of the organization.

A CAVEAT-HOW AND WHERE YOU APPLY IT DOES MATTER

We end with a warning: Religious leaders must use judgment in applying sensemaking. Just as it is possible that some groups (e.g., those making a life decision) will need all members to be skilled in personal discernment while the purposes of others may allow some of those skills to be developed during the process, leaders must think about the implications of sensemaking for the *work* at hand.

We mentioned before that Weick uses sensemaking as a descriptive concept. However, he and co-author Kathleen Sutcliffe have ventured into prescriptive application in a book on High Reliability Organizations. This book, while quite good, has little application to religious organizations. High Reliability Organizations are places such as nuclear reactors and air traffic control towers where the probability of an error is low but the consequences of an error are potentially disastrous.⁴⁰ For example, in applying sensemaking, Weick

³⁸ Jeavons, *Faithfulness*.

³⁹ Jeavons & Basinger, *Growing*.

⁴⁰ Weick & Sutcliffe, *Managing the Unexpected*.

and Sutcliffe pay much attention to the fact that sensemaking often results in plausible rather than accurate explanations. In a High Reliability Organization, accurate explanations are very important to prevent explosions, crashes, death, injuries, and mayhem.

However, in organized settings when relationships are more important than other outcomes, the question of whether we rely on plausible or accurate accounts is not always easy to answer. Even in a business or government organization, the organization and the individuals involved may be better served by a retirement speech that focuses on a plausible rather than an accurate account. A wedding toast may demand a plausible account. A legal situation, on the other hand, may require an accurate account. A pastor's final sermon may better serve God's purposes if it is a plausible account. Expert judgment is important here.

When reflecting on relationships, we ask you to consider the following advice from Frank Laubach, in his letters to his father on practicing the presence of God, another time when relationship is important:⁴¹

If you wander to a place where you can talk aloud without being overheard, you may speak to the invisible Companion inside you. Ask Him what is most on His heart and then answer back aloud with your voice what you believe God replies to you. Of course, we are not always sure whether we have guessed His answer correctly, but it is surprising how much of time we are very certain. *It really is not necessary to be sure that our answer is right, for the answer is not the great thing-He is!* [italics added] God is infinitely more important than His advice or His gifts; indeed, He, Himself, is the great gift. The most precious privilege in talking with Christ is this intimacy which we can have with Him.

When using sensemaking, or any concept from social science or management, it is important to take into consideration the purpose of the task at hand and the appropriateness of the tools that are offered.

⁴¹ Frank Laubach and Brother Lawrence, "Practical Help" in *Practicing the Presence of God* (Jacksonville: The SeedSowers, 1973), 33.

CONCLUSION

As we reflect on religious discernment and sensemaking, it seems that the rigorous processes of discernment allow groups to pay attention to both the relationships and the outcomes. That is, religious discernment processes are wise about sensemaking. In all organizations, but especially in religious organizations, decisions must take into account relationships and other outcomes. Making people part of the sensemaking process helps them shed their personal agendas and move toward the group. Prayer facilitates reflection, emotion, openness and understanding. Together, sensemaking and prayer help us achieve the double bottom line.

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