
INTEGRATIVE DECISION-MAKING FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERS: PRUDENCE, ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY, AND DISCERNMENT PRACTICES

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Abstract

Good Christian decision-making needs to be multifaceted. The approach to faith-based decision-making set forth in this essay incorporates three elements and recommends their integrated application for church leaders. We begin by drawing on the insights of Aristotle and Aquinas in relation to the virtue of prudence and its relevance for decision-making. Second, we work with resources from organizational theory, in particular models for decision-making from Charles Kepner, Benjamin Tregoe, and Victor Vroom. Finally, we draw upon the church's discernment traditions and describe congregational practices that might be embraced in relation to decision-making. We suggest that such an integrative approach offers the best possibility for making thoughtful, God-honoring decisions.

Introduction

How should church leaders make decisions? Some pastors emphasize waiting on the Lord for wisdom and guidance regarding a decision, an idea that has deep scriptural roots. Prayerfully seeking God's guidance is crucial, but at times it has been taken to a passive extreme which may reflect poor stewardship of additional resources God has made available for us. Other pastors, following decades of development in organizational and leadership studies, emphasize analytical processes and strategies that have emerged from that corpus of literature. While this approach has many strengths, it often leaves God completely out of the conversation. Still

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other pastors work on instinct or intuition. Such an approach can draw significantly on one's experience and gifts, but fails to benefit from probing the complexity of a situation.

Rather than settling for a single approach, we suggest that good Christian decision-making needs to be multifaceted. We need to draw on our faith tradition and also draw on ideas that have emerged from the thinking and research capabilities with which God has endowed humans. As Craig Van Gelder notes, "Relying primarily on one method, whether it is in relation to biblical teaching or scientific explanation, is no longer viable, if it ever was."¹ Van Gelder calls for an integrative approach, and this paper seeks to respond to that call.

Our approach to faith-based decision-making incorporates three elements and recommends their integrated application for church decision-makers. We begin by drawing on the Greek philosopher Aristotle and the Catholic philosopher Thomas Aquinas and their insights on virtues. We will focus specifically on the virtue of prudence and how it relates to decision-making. Second, we will work with resources from organizational theory, in particular models for decision-making from Charles Kepner, Benjamin Tregoe, and Victor Vroom. Finally, we draw upon the church's discernment traditions and describe congregational practices that might be embraced in relation to decision-making. We suggest that such an integrative approach offers the best possibility for making thoughtful, God-honoring decisions.

Moral Practice: The Classic/Christian Virtue of Prudence

Christian leaders are expected to be virtuous (1 Tim. 3; Jam. 2). The scriptural language of holiness (1 Thes. 2:10; Tit. 1:8), righteousness (2 Tim. 2:22), and godliness (1 Tim. 6:11) has a legitimate link to the ancient Greek

¹ Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 97.

idea of virtuousness.² The revival of Aristotelian virtue in the 13th century writings of Thomas Aquinas illustrates the possibility of a thoughtful integration of Aristotelian and Christian thought. Aquinas' work on virtue is both a redemption of Aristotle's work in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and an advancement of it from a theological perspective.

The virtue of prudence (*phronesis*, or "practical wisdom") is of particular interest here because it has to do with decision-making. Prudence points to the wisdom that leads to a good decision as well as the appropriate actions that follow. It is considered by both Aristotle and Aquinas to be central to the overall development of the virtuous person.³ Thomist philosopher Joseph Pieper says, "The fact is that nothing less than the whole ordered structure of the Occidental Christian view of man [sic] rests upon the pre-eminence of prudence over the other virtues."⁴ C.S. Lewis sums up the idea as "practical common sense, taking the trouble to think out what you are doing and what is likely to come of it."⁵

The Old Testament contains ideas that are similar to Aristotelian prudence. In the Hebrew Scriptures, it is the word *wisdom* that typically is applied in this way. (Although *phronesis* itself is found a number of times in the LXX translation of Proverbs.) Wise King Solomon was being prudent when he made a judgment regarding the infant and the question of the two mothers. Solomon drew on wisdom to make a just decision and followed through with the appropriate action. In the New

² One reason the Greek term *arete* (excellence, or virtue) is not frequently used in the New Testament is that the Aristotelean idea of excellence made the person the measure of him/herself. A person who is functioning and flourishing *as a person* is a virtuous person. Paul wouldn't disagree (Col. 3, esp. v. 10) but he would suggest that the Christian person has a different measure – Christ (Rom. 5:15-19) – and a different aim: the glory of God (Phil. 1:9-11).

³ Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 212-213.

⁴ Joseph Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 3.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics [Mere Christianity]* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 70.

Testament, prudence is akin to what Paul calls “the belt of truth” in Ephesians 6:14, which symbolizes the capacity to see things truthfully and to then apply other aspects of the spiritual armor as appropriate.

Angela McKay, in her work on the moral philosophy of Aquinas, catalogs the stages toward making a prudent decision this way:

First, the individual must take counsel, or consider the various courses of action open to him [sic]. Second, he must come to a judgment about the correct course of action. Finally, he must apply this judgment in action by issuing an imperative about what is to be done.⁶

Ideally these “stages” are less procedural and more intuitive. Furthermore, they are never generic. As Aristotle says, “practical wisdom [does not] deal only with universals. It must also be familiar with particulars, since it is concerned with action and action has to do with particulars.”⁷ Furthermore, it is the role of prudence to let the agent know what virtues are needed, how much of them are needed, and the timing in which they should be applied.⁸

In speaking of what it takes for a clergyperson to acquire a “pastoral imagination,” Campbell-Reed and Scharen say, “To develop prudence for pastoral leadership, such that the sights, sounds, feelings and relational character of the situation effectively tell us

⁶ Angela M. McKay, “The Infused and Acquired Virtues in Aquinas’ Moral Philosophy” (Dissertation at University of Notre Dame, 2004), 97. This process is very similar to what contemporary leadership scholars Tichy and Bennis refer to in their book, *Judgment: How Winning Leaders Make Great Calls* as (1) Pre: What happens before the leader makes the decision; (2) The Call: What the leader does as he or she makes the decision that helps it turn out to be the right one; (3) Execution: What the leader must oversee to make sure the call produces the desired results (2007), 20. Their framework offers helpful details for what typically happens for leaders at each of these stages (42). Notably, neither Aristotle nor Aquinas are cited by Tichy and Bennis.

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc. 1999), 157.

⁸ Important, but not described here, is Aristotle’s famous doctrine of the mean as found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

what to do, we need time and opportunity to experience the practice of ministry itself.”⁹ This assertion is also true for the church’s entire leadership team consisting of both ordained and non-ordained individuals. Everyone needs time to develop this virtue since it is required for good decisions, individually and collectively.

The prudence of Christians (reflecting a major Thomistic innovation on Aristotelian doctrine) is buttressed by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. Aristotle’s aim—the excellent human—is not a sufficient *telos* for the believer whose commitment also includes reflecting the way of Christ. This is one way that Aquinas takes his readers beyond Aristotle. Prudence for Christians is directed toward service of God and the community, not only toward becoming an excellent human.

For prudence to take a robustly Christian form, another feature should be acknowledged. In his book *Pagan Virtues*, John Casey notes, “The man [sic] of practical wisdom cannot be imagined to exist outside a tradition....Intelligent goodness does not spring fully disarmed from nowhere, but requires the support of a tradition of human life.”¹⁰ In their commentary on Casey, Hauerwas and Pinches note:

Practical wisdom cannot be had without a cross-generational community in which a tradition of practices is passed on, sustained, and modified.... Traditionally *justice* is the virtue which orders and sustains the community of virtue....Casey sets about to describe the sort of community in which justice is possible. It is, essentially, a community of friendship.¹¹

⁹ Ellen R. Campbell-Reed and Christian Scharen, “The Unfolding of Pastoral Imagination: Prudence as Key to Learning Ministry,” in *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*, 32 (2012), 102.

¹⁰ John Casey, *Pagan Virtues: An Essay in Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 170.

¹¹ Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 96.

Prudent friendship is the way in which the tradition is passed on and sustained.

This focus on friendship is found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹² Such a community, or in New Testament language, *koinonia*, or the family of God, consists of spiritual brothers and sisters. Aristotle offers a further benefit, beyond simple friendship: "We may also get some sort of training in virtue or excellence from living together with good men[sic]."¹³ Campbell-Reed and Scharen offer reinforcement: "Learning the knowledge and skills required for making wise judgments is best accomplished alongside mentors and peers who can share in the deliberative learning."¹⁴ Mature prudence requires friendship.

While this shared deliberative learning occurs in the presence of virtuous friends, it occurs, as Casey notes, within a tradition. In fact, what is right is determined within the reality of three traditions, or narratives: 1) the grand narrative of the Kingdom of God, 2) a particular doctrinal or denominational narrative, and 3) the local narrative of a family of believers. To get at a good decision—to lead prudently—congregational leaders will need to honor these stories and perhaps critique them. In the midst of his complex outworking of this idea, Don Browning explains:

In Aristotle, practical reason has the capacity to review rationally the history of ends supplied by our virtue-shaped passions and determine their relative and lasting value. When reflective review finds these tradition-shaped ends lacking, practical reason can supply a more adequate rational principle that mediates between the extremes,

¹² Christians can embrace only a partial application of Aristotle's concept of virtuous friendships. For a Christian critique of Aristotle on this point, see Hauerwas and Pinches, Chapter 5, "Friendship and Fragility."

¹³ Aristotle, 11.

¹⁴ Campbell-Reed and Scharen, 103.

thereby guiding us in a more satisfactory total direction.¹⁵

Prudent leadership in the church locates meaning in the stories that inform the decision-making process. These leaders also need to make use of those stories in a fair-minded way, allowing for both the sustainability of their core identity and the possibility for self-correction.

Jim Collins says that great organizations “*first* got the right people on the bus (and the wrong people off the bus) and *then* figured out where to drive it.”¹⁶ The people of God are not exempt from this wisdom. Prudent persons are needed in church leadership. The process of decision-making does not begin once everyone arrives at the meeting; it begins with people who find pleasure in what is good and who are actively developing the virtue of prudence in their lives.

Rational Practice: A Thinking Pattern for Making Choices

A rational process has a legitimate link to prudence. Although the aim is to get past a process *per se* and to become a prudent person (recall the goal of “expertise” or virtue as “second nature”), a rational process results in two benefits: (1) it brings all those in leadership—those who are well-developed in virtue and those still developing—into agreement about how to proceed, and (2) it provides a way to both engage the congregation and report back to them regarding how decisional due-diligence was carried out in the challenge under consideration.

We believe that when Christian leaders gather as a community of friends, their approach to decision-making should be grounded in virtue. Their approach should be intuitive, spiritual, and intelligent: art and science. Finding integration requires constant effort. What role

¹⁵ Dan S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1996), 176.

¹⁶ Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 41.

does strategy play in the decision-making process? Are there proven processes that enhance this aspect of decision-making without violating the way of Jesus?

A strategic leadership move is deciding how broadly to have others involved in a decision process. How does a leader know when to approach a decision individually, or alternatively, when to involve a larger group in a decision process? The work of Victor Vroom is helpful in sorting through this issue.

Vroom is a seminal theorist on decision-making processes.¹⁷ He suggests that when leading this process, an orienting activity for the leader is to assess the extent to which other members should be involved. Vroom argues that “there are situations where decisiveness on the part of the leader is welcomed to a far greater degree than the opportunity to participate in the process.”¹⁸ The diagram (Figure 1) below shows a continuum of individual-group involvement in a decision process.¹⁹

Vroom explains that situational factors guide the approach the leader should take to group involvement in a decision. A leader appropriately makes a decision him/herself (left end of the chart) when the leader assesses that “I have the knowledge, commitment without involvement is likely, time is valuable, interaction is difficult or impossible.”²⁰ As the significance of the decision or the possibility of dissimilarity in opinions increases, a leader moves toward the right of the continuum. The point is that an effective leader will carefully consider these factors when deciding the level of involvement of her constituents or group members. Some decisions are clearly the purview and responsibility of the leader. Other more complex decisions require

¹⁷ Victor Vroom, *Leadership and Decision Making* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973). For a condensed look at his work, see Victor H. Vroom, "Educating Managers for Decision Making and Leadership," in *Management Decision* 41, 10 (2003). Other works include Vroom, 2003; Jago and Vroom, 1980; Vroom & Jago, 1974.

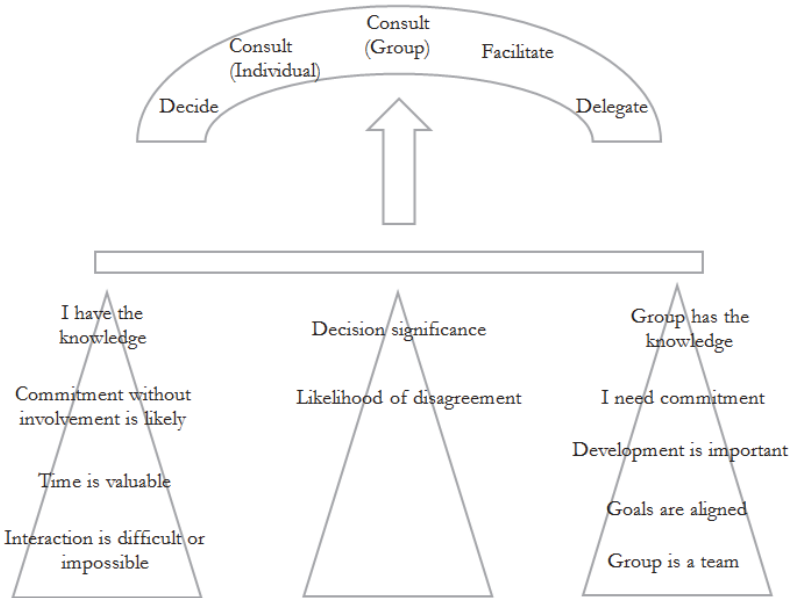
¹⁸ Vroom (2003) 970. Diagram used with permission of Victor Vroom.

¹⁹ Diagram used with permission of Victor Vroom.

²⁰ Vroom (2003) 970.

broader involvement. We argue that prudent leaders will not default to their preferred decision approach but consider options at hand such as the Vroom model in order to evaluate the particular situation and determine the extent to which others should be involved in the decision.

Figure 1:



The social scientists Charles Kepner and Benjamin Tregoe provide further tools for making prudent decisions, particularly in relation to Vroom’s “facilitate” and “consult” options above, which are called for when more than one person is involved. By examining the thinking processes of both proficient and poor managers, Kepner and Tregoe identified four basic patterns of thinking:²¹

²¹ Charles Kepner and Benjamin Tregoe, *The New Rational Manager: An Updated Edition for a New World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Research Press, 2006), 9-15. This work provides a detailed description of all four of the thinking patterns identified by Kepner and Tregoe and will be helpful to those who want content beyond what is provided here.

- 1) Situation Appraisal: *What's going on here?*
- 2) Problem Analysis: *Why did this happen?*
- 3) Decision Analysis: *What course of action should be taken?*
- 4) Potential Problem Analysis: *What lies ahead?*

Here, we will focus on the third of the four patterns: decision analysis. The members of the team carry out a rational decision process involving four considerations:

- There is recognition that a choice must be made.
- There is consideration of the specific factors that must be satisfied if the choice is to succeed.
- There is a decision about what kind of action will best satisfy these factors.
- There is consideration of what risks may be attached to our final choice of action that could jeopardize its safety and success.²²

Essentially this process involves the development of specific criteria that are used to evaluate different options and includes the assessment of potential risks to the final choice. With language that correlates with Aristotle's view of prudence, Kepner and Tregoe say, "Good decision-making, like good problem solving, depends heavily on experience and judgment."²³ But for these thinkers, prudence is not enough. They continue, "It is within the framework of *systematic procedure* that experience and judgment produce successful results and a reputation for managerial excellence." These concepts are relevant not only to the business world, but also to organizational settings such as the church and other religious institutions.

Kepner and Tregoe's perspective is compatible with the Christian commitment to truth, relational harmony, and the value of order. As Kepner and Tregoe assert,

When people are provided with a common approach to decision-making, they find they can indeed work as a team. There is more sharing of relevant information. Differing positions are more

²² Kepner and Tregoe, 78.

²³ Kepner and Tregoe, 79. Original italics.

successfully reconciled because the process of decision-making is less biased. Inevitably, the quality of decision-making improves.²⁴

They claim that this process has a unifying dynamic within a team and enhances collaboration. These are certainly aspects we desire in our congregations also.

Using a systematic approach like this one can be a powerful tool to support decision-making. But it is just that: a tool. The *process* does not make a decision; prudent leaders, and members of a congregation, still make the final decision, hopeful that their work reflects the will of God.

Discernment Practice: Making Space to Notice the Movement of God's Spirit

Finally, practices of discernment offer ways constantly to remind the decision makers that the Holy Spirit must be given frequent opportunity to guide and speak into the process. Christ promises us the abiding presence of the Spirit and promises that the Spirit will move in our midst (John 14:17; 26). This means that we have more than just our rational faculties to draw upon in the discernment process. However, the ways of the Spirit are something of a mystery, and so the question of how we might proceed along with the Spirit is a legitimate one.

For some, naming the presence of the Spirit may seem to state the obvious, but too often when the presence of the Spirit is not named, it is forgotten or ignored. As congregational leaders invoke the presence of the Spirit at the start of, or during, meetings, an awareness is fostered among the participants regarding the role of the Spirit in the meeting, and the community is invited to open to the Spirit's moving.

Part of the commission of spiritual leaders is to "discern what is the will of God" (Rom. 12:2). This is a rather intimidating charge, fraught with interminable questioning about the nature of God's specific will.

²⁴ Kepner and Tregoe, 77.

Neither avoidance nor the other extreme of complete certitude regarding God's desires will serve us well. In spite of the premise of some virtue philosophers that prudence leads to the single right decision, the operative view of the present authors is that God's gracious will is seldom reduced to a single option. Here, therefore, the language of finding God's will is taken to indicate a sphere of action or a range of possibilities that fall within God's will rather than the identification of one and only one correct answer to a decision question. This vantage point offers prudent deciders the appropriate constraints provided by their narratives along with the creative freedom found when there are multiple ways to respond to a challenge. We receive guidance for the discernment process from the Jerusalem Council's process in Acts 15.²⁵ Paul, Barnabas, and some others went up to Jerusalem to discuss a problem that had cropped up (the relation of salvation and circumcision). The issue was thrown open for all to debate (vv. 6-7). After a number of others had spoken, Peter takes his turn to be heard (vv. 7-11). Then Paul and Barnabas take their turn, during which "the whole assembly kept silence" (v. 12). After they speak, James takes his turn to speak and calls on the others to listen while he does so (v. 13). We see here two characteristics of Spirit-led communal discernment: 1) *all* are invited to have voice in the gathering, and 2) those who are *not* speaking need to *listen* to what another brother or sister is saying.²⁶

The decision is written down in a letter that is to be delivered to Antioch by Paul and Barnabas. The letter describes the decision that has been made: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials..." (v. 28).

²⁵ John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992), 62-63. See also Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1996), 108.

²⁶ These same characteristics are part of the life of the church in Corinth as seen in 1 Cor. 14.

This describes a decision that was *not* made exclusively by James. It was a decision guided by the Holy Spirit (“it seemed good to the Holy Spirit”) and made by the group (“it seemed good...to us”). The decision that James had reached was then not one that he autocratically decreed, but one that was consented to by the others who were present and one that was held up to the evaluation of the Holy Spirit.

This opening to the Spirit’s input is a third characteristic of Spirit-led communal discernment. As the council members in Acts 15 sought to make a decision, they allowed all to speak, listened to each other and held the decision up to be confirmed by the Holy Spirit.

The skill of listening is characteristic of the prudent person. Because prudent persons are committed to receiving the gift of counsel, they will therefore seek to listen well to others as part of good deliberation. And as one leading a discernment process, a prudent person will guide the process so that others listen well too.

Discernment Practice 1: Discovery Questions

How might the three characteristics of discernment described above emerge in concrete practices? Here we will describe three discernment practices for consideration: Discovery Questions, silence in the agenda, and Dwelling in the Word.

The Quaker tradition has long made use of the “Clearness Committee” in relation to personal discernment. Here we will explore how guidelines for the functioning of a Clearness Committee might be used for communal discernment as well.²⁷

The basic process of a Clearness Committee involves a person gathering together a few trusted friends and explaining to them the issue for discernment. The task of the friends is to ask open, honest questions with the hope that these questions will help the individual to discover

²⁷ A detailed description of the Clearness Committee process can be found in Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 134-148.

and follow the light of the Spirit. Before speaking, the friends are to ask themselves what questions might be most helpful in helping the focal person discern the moving of the Spirit in relation to the stated issue. The questions they ask are to be genuine questions to which the questioners truly cannot anticipate the answer. Opinions couched as questions are ruled out, so language such as, "Have you ever thought about...?" or, "I wonder if it would good for you to...?" is not used. The factual aspects may be explored with questions such as, "What is most interesting to you about this job opportunity?" or, "How might this impact your sphere of influence and service?" The emotional dimensions might be explored with questions such as, "If you imagine yourself lying awake at night thinking about this, what feelings do you imagine having?" or, "As you pour over the scenery of this decision, are there any particular locations at which you feel joy?"

The focus person may take as much silence as she needs to consider the question before responding. She is invited to answer as openly as she feels comfortable answering, or to not answer a question if she feels uncomfortable doing so for any reason. In responding, the focus person should refrain from lengthy answers; this allows time for deepening rounds of questions.

The pacing of the process is crucial. The questions are not to be asked in a rapid-fire manner. After the focus person responds, time should be given for silent reflection before the next question is posed. The pace should be gentle and attentive. A good moderator can help the group slow down as needed.

When the agreed-upon ending time nears, the moderator may ask the focus person if she would like to suspend the questions-only rule and to have the group mirror back what they have heard the focus person saying. Again, the participants are to refrain from advice or psychoanalysis; even in this optional move away from questions, the focus is still on helping the friend herself to discover or see the Spirit's moving.

While the Clearness Committee process is a communal one, it is focused on an *individual's* decision. What might it look like to apply elements of the Clearness Committee to a *group's* decision-making process? Here is an experimental suggestion for use in a church board context of what we shall call Discovery Questions.²⁸

When a board chooses to use Discovery Questions, they identify the first step as choosing a moderator for the process. This might be the chair of the board, but it could also be another board member who is particularly gifted at guiding silence. The purpose of the Discovery Questions should be explained: this questioning process is intended to help the group attend to the moving of the Spirit in their midst. This is not the time to work through a logical decision tree or to focus on rationality alone—that can come before or after (it comes after in this paper—see below).

The moderator begins by setting a timeframe and briefly describing the focus issue. She then invites any member of the group to offer a question for the whole group to ponder. The purpose of the question should be to help the group pay attention to how the Spirit might be leading in relation to the focus issue. All questions should be minimally directive and should be questions for which the questioner genuinely cannot predict the answer. As Parker Palmer suggests in relation to a different practice, “Here we are governed by that simple countercultural rule, ‘No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight.’”²⁹ The moderator should also ask for a gentle pace of asking questions to allow space for plenty of reflective silence.

²⁸ Palmer describes what he calls a “circle of trust” which has similarities to a Clearness Committee, but is intended to help all participants (not just a focus person) move toward deeper transformation and understanding (114-128).

The circle of trust differs from what we are proposing because, like the Clearness Committee, it also focuses on each individual's journey; our focus is on how a group might approach issues that face the community as a whole.

²⁹ Palmer, 114.

As any are so moved, they are invited to respond to a question that has been offered. There is no assumption, however, that all will be so moved. The responses should be thoughtful, but not lengthy. As with the asking of questions, the group should seek to embrace a slow rhythm of responses. A rapid-fire style of response that is appropriate for some settings is put aside here.

When a group is new to the process, they might be given sample questions, such as:

- “What are the deepest things that get triggered in you in relation to this issue?”
- “When you dream of the best possible future for our congregation, how might this issue fit in that?”
- “What makes you saddest in relation to this issue?”
- “What makes you most hopeful as you consider this issue?”
- “What stories from scripture, whether directly related or not to our issue, come to mind right now?”

In a manner similar to the Clearness Committee process, when the agreed-upon ending time nears, the moderator may choose to suspend the question/answer structure and ask the group to share, as they feel prompted by the Spirit, what they felt and observed during the process. Then the meeting is drawn to a close or the meeting moves on to another phase.

This process contains the characteristics of Spirit-led discernment set forth above: everyone is given an opportunity to speak, all are asked to listen deeply, and the leading of the Holy Spirit is sought.

Discernment Practice 2: Silence in the Agenda

Another receptacle for the work of the Spirit may be created by scheduling silence into the agenda for a meeting. Often an elders' board feels tight on time; meeting agendas are crammed full, and even then some items are tabled until the next meeting. Adding five, ten, or fifteen minutes of silence to the agenda can seem inefficient. Why not just have everyone commit to silent prayer on his or her own before and after they gather so

that we can maximize the productivity from the time we have together? Prayer prior to and subsequent to a meeting is definitely to be encouraged, but silent prayer *within* the meeting may uniquely shape the whole meeting time.

Prayers at the start and end of a meeting are commonly included, but often these become perfunctory prayers that are viewed as bookends to the *real* business at hand. By scheduling a period of silent prayer into the agenda, the chairperson communicates that the whole of what they are doing is to be intertwined with a prayerful openness to the Spirit.

Charles Olsen offers a number of questions that may be helpful to reflect upon as part of a time of prayerful silence in an elders' meeting:

Am I closing myself off from information that we need to make this decision? Whom do I need to forgive to be more fully present here? What is an image of God that needs to come to bear on this setting? How does the scripture that we read shed light on us now? Am I operating in a need-to-win or need-to-save-face mode? How would servant leaders make this decision?³⁰

These questions help to connect the work at hand to the resources of our faith.

After the period of scheduled silence, the chairperson might ask if anyone would like to offer a reflection related to the time of silence, or she might simply ask God to add God's blessing to the time of silence and then move on to the next item on the agenda or return to the conversation that was in progress.

The practice of scheduling silence into the agenda has some interesting connections to Ron Heifetz' work on leadership. As mentioned above, some members of the elders' board may resist the idea of having silence

³⁰ Charles M. Olsen, *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1995), 22. Original italics. This book has a number of other excellent ideas related to connecting the work of an elders' board to the work of the Holy Spirit.

scheduled into the agenda. This is where Heifetz's idea of holding steady is important—the leader may need to persist with putting this in the agenda even if others are impatient with it.³¹

Another connection is seen in the parallel between the scheduling of silence into the agenda and Heifetz's encouragement for leaders to occasionally go to the balcony. By this, Heifetz means that leaders need to create space to reflect on what is going on around them.³² That space could range from a few seconds to an extended retreat. When the chairperson schedules silence into the agenda, she is creating an opportunity for the members to go to the balcony, from where they might more clearly see how the Spirit is present and guiding. The chairperson might helpfully offer this time for silent prayer even when it is *not* scheduled into the agenda if she senses that time to go to the balcony would be particularly helpful at that moment.

A third parallel is found in relation to what Heifetz refers to as pacing the work.³³ People can only take on so much emotional distress at one time, and so a leader may need to slow down the work so that others involved don't get overwhelmed to the point that they just give up. People need time to process and adjust. In a small way, scheduled silence in a meeting is an act of slowing things down, pacing the work. Members of the elders' board may find this time beneficial in processing and catching up emotionally with where the discussion is going.

Discernment Practice 3: Dwelling in the Word

A third receptacle we offer for the work of the Spirit is the process of Dwelling in the Word, a process that has been helpfully included in the agenda of elders'

³¹ Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 141-146.

³² Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), 252-253, and Heifetz and Linsky (2002), chapter 3.

³³ Heifetz (1994), 241-246, and Heifetz and Linsky (2002), 116-120.

board meetings, congregational meetings, and judicatory meetings.

Dwelling in the Word involves spending time with the same biblical text as part of multiple meetings over a period of months or years. It is a process that can be used in congregational meetings, leadership meetings, seminary classes, church business meetings, and conference or denominational gatherings. The process can be done in as little as ten minutes. Or, in daylong or multi-day gatherings, an hour or more can be used for Dwelling in the Word. While the process is most often placed at the beginning of the gathering, it can also be meaningfully scheduled into the middle of a group's time together.

Prior to the meeting, the leader selects a Bible passage for the process. When the process begins, Bibles or copies of the selected passage are distributed to all in attendance. Then the selected passage is read out loud. After sitting in silent reflection on the passage for a few minutes, people are asked to pair up. One suggestion made by Ellison and Keifert is to have people pair up with the person they know least in the group.³⁴ Participants may also be asked to simply pair up with a person next to them. Prompting questions for reflection are then offered, such as:

- What caught your attention in this passage?
- Where was a memory or connection triggered?
- What might the Holy Spirit be saying through this passage for our congregation or for you personally?

Before participants begin sharing in pairs, they are alerted that after the initial reflection time each will be asked to share with others what their partners said. With this process in mind, participants listen more actively and often re-state to their partners what they've heard to make sure they have a good understanding. This listening is significant in at least three ways. First, it invites a

³⁴ Pat Taylor Ellison and Patrick R. Keifert, *Dwelling in the Word* (St. Paul, MN: Church Innovations Institute, 2008).

person to be open to how the Spirit may be speaking through the other. Second, the speaking and listening act helps to weave the relational fabric of the community. It is a shared activity, a communal venture. Third, as an exercise in listening, it develops the ability to listen more fully even beyond the time of Dwelling in the Word. As participants move into other segments of the gathering, they do so having practiced listening to each other and are more likely to continue with a listening posture.

After 6-8 minutes (or longer if the setting allows), the pairs are brought back together. If the group is smaller than 10-12 people, members can report back to the whole group highlights of what their partners shared. In larger groups, people can be asked to join with other pairs to form groups of 6 or 8 and then in that context share what their partners said. This segment may take 8-10 minutes, or again, longer if time allows. If multiple groups are used for the reporting-back segment, the moderator alerts the groups when two minutes remain in the sharing time so the groups can be sure that all get to share, that everyone is heard. Then the moderator wraps up the time of Dwelling in the Word and leads into the next part of the meeting.

This approach to scripture is not focused on the use of text-critical methods, though those methods are valuable. Dwelling in the Word focuses on imagining, wondering, mulling, and listening. Participants are not expected to come up with “right” answers. Rather, they are to be open to what the Spirit might want to say to them individually and communally at this point in time. Dwelling in the Word invites the Spirit to help participants see and feel connections between the text and their context. It seeks to connect the vision and ethics of Jesus with a specific people in a specific place. It draws on a different part of the mind than do text-critical methods and seeks emotional and situational engagement with the text.

The purpose of Dwelling in the Word is not to find specific answers to the issue at hand. The process is unlikely to provide a specific answer to the budget issue

faced by the elders' board described above. But the process is formative in several relevant ways.

First, by attending to scripture in the midst of a meeting, the group members are reminded of the Christian nature of what they are doing. They are reminded to draw on the resources of their faith as they move through the decision process. God is explicitly brought into the process by the attention to the Word.

Second, Dwelling in the Word invites *every* participant to say something as part of the process. It communicates that *everyone* has something of value to offer to the group. The invitation for all to speak is a way of embodying the first characteristic of Spirit-led communal discernment described above.

Third, Dwelling in the Word provides training in listening. Because the group is instructed to report back on what they heard their *partners* say, each person is encouraged to listen closely to another. This is an embodiment of the second characteristic of Spirit-led discernment described above. And by practicing the art of listening here, the participants are trained to listen better to one another in other parts of the meeting.

Finally, Dwelling in the Word is predicated on the idea that the Spirit will indeed speak to us while attending to the same text over the course of multiple meetings. Even after Dwelling in the Word on multiple occasions, participants report that new insights still emerge for them from the passage. What the Spirit wants to communicate is not exhausted via a single reading of the text. The process of ongoing discovery orients us to expect that the Spirit may help us to see unimagined possibilities in relation to even the current decision upon which the elders' board is focused.

This third practice of Dwelling in the Word, like the others, includes the three characteristics of Spirit-led discernment found in Acts 15 and 1 Cor. 14: all are invited to speak, everyone is to listen carefully, and the explicit leading of the Spirit is invoked.

Conclusion

The specific proposals above regarding decision-making theory and discernment practices might well be developed along different lines. Prudent leaders might substitute different organizational theories in the constellation of decision-shaping factors. Other practices may be equally helpful in opening up space for the Spirit to be involved in decision-making. The goal in this article is not to identify the *best* way in relation to each, but to show how attention to each area increases the likelihood that the decisions made by congregations will be good, faithful, and—over the long term life of the community—fruitful.

Congregational leaders have the responsibility of helping those they lead to pay attention to these multiple dimensions of decision-making, rather than flattening out the process. When facing adaptive challenges, ideal congregational decision-making will be multifaceted. This requires virtuous people who use their God-given rational capacities while continuing to draw deeply from the Christian tradition. Embracing such an approach will serve congregations well as they seek to live into their calling.