

Communal Discernment in Organizational Planning:
Interweaving, Inclusive and Incarnational Approaches to
Missional Direction-Setting in Christian Churches and Organizations

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Ministry awarded by Tyndale Seminary

February, 2012

Toronto, Canada

Tyndale Seminary

Thesis Approval

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DEGREE GRANTED: Doctor of Ministry

YEAR DEGREE GRANTED: 2012

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ABSTRACT

This research project explores and illuminates ways that practices of communal discernment can be interwoven with organizational planning processes to help a church or organization gain greater clarity around missional direction, a heightened sense of unity around shared purposes, and assurance of God's leading presence. A qualitative research methodology was utilized to field-test an integrated approach to prayer and planning in three different settings. The research indicates that the adoption of interweaving, inclusive and incarnational approaches to missional direction-setting, with emphasis on Scripture-focused listening prayer, can help churches and organizations overcome the divide between "spiritual" and "worldly" practices that often hampers planning efforts, and also cultivate learning communities that seek to follow God's direction into God's mission.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have played important roles in supporting the research and writing efforts behind this thesis. First, a thank you to those who helped me to get started: Mark Petersen, for encouraging me to develop what was churning inside me into the proposal for professional development funding that was granted by Bridgeway Foundation; Dr. Paul Magnus for supervising the independent research project that led to my involvement in the DMin program at Tyndale Seminary; and Bruce Clemenger and all of the staff at The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada for working with me to develop a practice of communal discernment, which became the basis for my ongoing research.

I also offer many thanks to those who participated in the field-testing research – your interest in and commitment to the underlying premises and purposes of the research convinced me it was worth doing. I hope that you will be pleased with what we have worked on together.

Also, the Tyndale Seminary faculty who acted as guides along the way were tremendously helpful: Drs. Paul Bramer and Mark Chapman, who introduced me to the excitement of undertaking practical theology; Peter Dickens for his insights and willingness to test what I was developing in his own context; and especially Dr. Janet Clark, my project-thesis supervisor, who, among other ways of providing support, encouraged me to keep on digging for the conceptual framework that she knew was buried beneath the detail of my research findings and reading notes.

I was tremendously helped and encouraged by Les, Keith, David and Daniel – members of my learning group within the larger DMin cohort – and by Gail, Pat and Lucy, whose prayer support was invaluable. The impact of those prayers is immeasurable, as is the ongoing and loving support offered to me by my husband, Edward, and children, Alison, Michael and Mark. I will never find words or actions enough to repay you for all that you have put up with over the past three years, and so I will simply continue to enjoy the grace you have extended to me.

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REFERENCE NOTES

1. Unless indicated otherwise, Scripture references are taken from the New Living Translation. Citations were accessed online in most cases from www.biblegateway.com.

2. References to the data collected in this research project are abbreviated as follows:

FN = Field Notes

EQ = Evaluation Questionnaire

I = Interview

In most cases, these references are accompanied by an abbreviation to denote the site location: A, B or C.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Chapter One introduces this thesis in relation to five elements, as follows:

a) the purpose for the “Communal Discernment in Organizational Planning” research project; b) the reasons for entering into the project; c) the research questions that help to make sense of the project outcomes; d) the scope of the project; and e) definitions of some key terms used throughout the thesis.

Purpose

The purpose of the “Communal Discernment in Organizational Planning” research project was to field-test in three different locations the effectiveness of an approach to organizational planning that had been developed by staff-members of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC).¹ This approach attempts to interweave Scripture-focused listening prayer with organizational planning processes in an effort to gain greater clarity around missional direction, a heightened degree of organizational unity and assurance of God’s leading presence.

The central thesis examined in the project is that when prayer is woven into organizational planning, organizations will make decisions, especially those related to missional direction-setting, that are shaped in reference to spiritual, as

¹ The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) is the national association of evangelical Christians in Canada. Since 1964 the EFC has provided a national forum for Evangelicals and a constructive voice for biblical principles in life and society. Together with 129 (to date) other national groups, it is a member of the World Evangelical Alliance.

well as organizational development, principles. Such an approach purports to ensure what may otherwise be assumed or overlooked, even in Christian churches or organizations.

This research project suggests ways in which such an approach to organizational planning resonates with theological perspectives around God's presence in organizational life and with various bodies of literature regarding non-traditional approaches to planning. The project also explores specific means by which prayer can be meaningfully interwoven with organization planning processes, in such a way that God – having been welcomed into the room at the beginning of a meeting and asked for a blessing at the end – will not, as Graham Standish suggests, be left “standing in the hall” in the meantime because the proceedings are seen to hold no spiritual significance (Standish 2005, 88).

The research goal was not to develop a template for practices of communal discernment that could be applicable to all or most Christian ministry settings – indeed, as the research will show, such an attempt would run counter to the principles at play in the practice. Nevertheless, while my interpretation of the research results is limited to the findings that arise directly from the data collected in the three field-testing locations, this research project seeks to explore approaches to organizational planning that may be transferable to churches and organizations in other settings. The research findings emerging from the three test-sites cannot be generalized to all applications, but they may be helpful to communities in comparable contexts.

The Opportunity

The original impetus behind the research project arose in the context of my work with the EFC in facilitating the formation of several ministry partnerships that operated on the EFC's administrative and communications platform. The initial motivation for many of those who participated in these partnerships tended to be primarily a strategic one: partnering was deemed to be a good way of stewarding God's resources to avoid ministry duplication and fill ministry gaps. Over time, however, some of the participants came to ask, "What lies beneath the strategic advantage to partnering? Might God have an agenda for us that we're not yet aware of, and if so, how can we enter into prayer together to listen to God for what that agenda might be?"

An opportunity to undertake research into ways of bringing prayer into organizational planning, through an independent study supervised by Dr. Paul Magnus at Tyndale Seminary in 2007-2008, led to the suggestion made by Bruce Clemenger, the president of the EFC, that such research begin with the EFC staff, given the organization's need for an updated strategic plan. Along the way, it became apparent that a larger opportunity presented itself – one that went beyond matters of organizational development and dug more deeply than originally envisioned.

This level of opportunity became apparent in terms of a problem expressed by different ministry leaders whom I encountered in a variety of contexts, namely, the difficulty of developing practices around organizational

planning that were not considered too “spiritual” on the one hand or too “worldly” on the other. This difficulty has become heightened during a time when all ministry leaders are experiencing the need to manage transition in ever-changing ministry environments, and are thus expected to develop a strategic plan of one sort or another.

In terms of the prayer-and-planning project, there were those, on the one hand, who considered strategic planning to be a business practice imported inappropriately into Christian churches or organizations and, on the other hand, those who paid lip-service to the importance of prayer but ended up giving it no more than a sugar-coating role. The dilemma expressed by these leaders suggested that underlying this supposed dichotomy was the “sacred/secular” split that plagues much of the deliberation and debate in many Christian contexts.

Research Questions and Dynamic

This research project explores an approach to organizational planning that seeks to overcome the sacred/secular dualism experienced by many people engaged in Christian ministry. It does so by way of: a) the development of a theological rationale (Chapter Two); b) a review of pertinent literature directed to both non-Christian and Christian audiences (Chapter Three); and c) examination and analysis of the data collected through the application of the practice in the three field-testing locations (Chapter Five).

The development of a theological rationale was a particularly important element in the research project, in that it brought to light some of the basic issues

underlying the sacred/secular divide, as well as some of the basic principles in the developing practices of communal discernment that could perhaps address those issues. Thus the project was an application of “practical theology” – a way of bringing theological premises into the discussion of how we do things in Christian ministry contexts.

In Richard Osmer’s thinking, the broad research questions that are addressed by practical theology include:

- What is going on?
- Why is this going on?
- What ought to be going on?
- How might we respond? (Osmer 2008, 4)

The questions addressed by this particular foray into practical theology are:

- What difficulties arise in bringing prayer into organizational planning?
- Why do these difficulties arise?
- What is a theologically sound approach that could mitigate the difficulties in bringing prayer into organizational planning?
- How might the practice of communal discernment be seen as an effective response to the difficulties around bringing prayer into organizational planning?

In addition to taking a practical theology approach to my research project, I suggest in Chapter Four of this thesis that my research methodology is best described in terms of the “grounded theory,” where a theoretical understanding of the project is said to emerge from the research findings. Such an approach

contrasts with traditional scientific methods, where a theory is developed into a set of hypotheses, which are then tested in different ways.

Because the theological rationale (Chapter Two) and literature review (Chapter Three) precede the description and analysis of the research findings (Chapter Five), readers may infer that a theoretical understanding of the issues at play drove the field-testing research, rather than the other way around. However, the dynamic that I experienced throughout this project can be more accurately described as one of interplay between the various kinds of research that I undertook.

In other words, the theological research was informed as much by the field-testing research as it was by my reading prior to the field-testing research. In fact, while I had some glimmerings of how the theological rationale would be directed early on in the process, Chapter Two and Chapter Five were written simultaneously, with observations that emerged from the research findings driving further theological reading and interpretation, which in turn emerged into the “interweaving,” “inclusive” and “incarnational” themes that provided a conceptual framework for Chapter Five and for a revised Chapter Three as well.

What intrigues me about the research process is the way in which my understanding of a communal discernment practice that is focused on hearing God’s voice was mirrored in the way in which I undertook the research. The discernment practices described in this thesis also describe the research and writing dynamic behind the thesis: prayerful and Scripture-focused reflection

characterized my attempts to interpret the findings from the field-testing research and my theological reasoning at the same time.

Scope

The scope of the research project was determined in part by the context of the three test-sites and by their various ministry purposes and organizational shapes and sizes. These sites included a Christian ministry organization with a leadership development focus, a Christian higher education institution and the staff of a mid-sized congregation.

In terms of cultural context, all three test-sites are to be found in English-speaking, primarily Caucasian communities in urban settings in Canada. All three are rooted in the Protestant family of Christianity generally, and are shaped by the theological tradition of Canadian Evangelicalism, broadly speaking. (As will be noted in Chapter Six, further research would be required to examine how adaptive communal discernment practices are in diverse cultural and inter-cultural settings.)

A second factor related to scope of the project was the research time frame and my stance as researcher during that time. The research took place, in relation to the formal collection of data from the three test-sites, from December 2010 to May 2011. In the case of the second and third test-sites, where my research role was as an external participant in the community in question, my understanding of the broader context within which the research was applied was limited to an understanding of only the immediate circumstances over a short period of time. In

the case of the first test-site, where I was an internal participant, I had a wider and more longstanding understanding of the community context.

Finally, a third factor determining the scope of the project, especially as it relates to the choice of sources for the theological rationale and literature review, is the theological and ecclesiological traditions that have shaped my past and current experience as a Christ-follower. As may be inferred by my references to Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Albert Wolters and Hendrik Hart, Dutch Reformational thinking has played a critical role in developing my view of the world and of the church in the world. From my references to several Evangelical and Roman Catholic writers, on the other hand, I trust that readers will sense an ongoing interplay between the tradition I was raised in and traditions that I have been introduced to over the past two decades.

Definitions

While a fuller understanding of the terms listed below will be developed as the chapters unfold, it will be helpful to readers to have a preliminary understanding of their meaning at the outset. In the context of this thesis, the terms that require definition include:

- **Discernment:** the work of sorting out that which is of God and that which is not, in relation to the need for decision-making or, in the case of this thesis, organizational planning in the context of missional direction-setting

- Communal discernment: a way of conducting such discernment in community; as will be noted in this thesis, communal discernment practices can include various forms of listening prayer, that is, prayer that is specifically oriented toward hearing from God, rather than, for instance, interceding with God or raising petitions to God
- Missional: an adjective describing participation in the *missio Dei*, a seminal term used by David Bosch in *Transforming Mission* and defined by him as “God’s self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God’s involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, in which the church is privileged to participate” (Bosch 1991, 10)
- Interweaving: often describing, for the purposes of this thesis, the work of intentionally bringing together prayer and planning processes in such a way that the prayer outcomes inform and shape the planning process
- Inclusive: the term used for the purposes of this thesis to describe practices of discernment and planning that draw a broad range of community-members into participation in those practices
- Incarnational: the term used, again for the purposes of this thesis, to denote the sense of God’s presence in the midst of human activity and experience

CHAPTER TWO

THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE

The theological foundation for understanding and applying practices of communal discernment is explained in this chapter in relation to five premises. These five premises, which also form the outline for this chapter, include:

1. The theological starting-point for communal discernment is Jesus' call to discipleship, which leads us into participation in God's mission to reconcile all of creation through the saving work of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.
2. The approach to discernment taken in this research project is defined relationally: we come to know God's leading presence both individually and communally in dialogical relationship with God.
3. The potential to interweave prayer and planning emerges from the missional call of Jesus, which restores our capacity to engage in the original creation mandate and thus prohibits false dichotomies between "sacred" and "secular."
4. Communal discernment presumes theologically that the attempt by a Christian church or organization to discern God's leading is best heard in community, where each person is responsible for listening to the voice of Jesus.
5. The theological justification for the inclusion of Scripture-focused listening prayer – a critical component of the type of communal

discernment practiced in this project – rests on the incarnation of God’s Word in Jesus Christ and on our encounter with God’s Word in Scripture.

This chapter will explore these theological premises in relation to themes found in Scripture, as well as those expressed by certain theologians in the Christian tradition.

The Call to Discipleship

The theological basis for engaging in practices of communal discernment in relation to organizational planning begins with the call of Jesus into discipleship and engagement in God’s mission, which in turns requires a listening posture so that the call can be heard.

The Call of Jesus

Communal discernment is directly related to Jesus’ call, “Follow Me!” (see, for example, Mark 1:17). The starting point for developing a theologically sound approach to organizational planning is listening for the voice of Jesus when making decisions in community. We ask for God’s wisdom in sorting out the best path to take into a future situation, and we do so in the faith that Jesus leads us on that path insofar as we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, who calls our names and walks ahead of us (John 10:3-4).

In the context of organizational planning, we exercise our discipleship as a community, ever seeking to follow Jesus in the paths of missional engagement

into which he is leading us. In order to follow Jesus into these paths, we need to be listening for Jesus' voice. Gordon Smith writes in *The Voice of Jesus*, "We do not genuinely fulfill what God is calling us to be and do as a community unless we develop the capacity to hear together the voice of Jesus in our midst – his voice of assurance and comfort, but also his voice of call and guidance" (Smith 2003, 17).

Listening together for the voice of Jesus is crucial in the communal exercise of a church or organization's participation in the *missio Dei*. Craig Van Gelder, when presenting a design for communal discernment birthed out of a missional ecclesiology, points to this need when he encourages congregations to engage "in some form of a discernment process in order to understand their purpose (mission), and how they are being called through this purpose to participate in God's mission in the world (*missio Dei*)" (Van Gelder 2007, 107).

Maintaining a Listening Posture

Communal discernment belongs to the family of spiritual disciplines that keep us on track as disciples, thus following Jesus into God's mission rather than missions of our own devising. If discernment is primarily about listening, then the best posture for listening is humility: we give up our own agendas and wait on God for God's agenda.

Spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and Scripture reading, help us to maintain the humble listening posture that is essential to discipleship and to engaging in God's missional call. In Dallas Willard's terms, spiritual disciplines

help to “bring our whole selves into cooperation with the divine order, so we can experience more and more a vision and power beyond ourselves” (Willard 1988, 153). Surely the practice of communal discernment, which requires us to stay tuned to the voice of Jesus and resonate accurately with the Holy Spirit, qualifies as one of these disciplines.

The spiritual discipline of prayer, in the form of listening prayer more specifically, is critical to developing the listening posture we need in order to engage in God’s mission. If we wish to stay tuned to Jesus’ voice, then we need to find ways of communing with God in prayer regularly. Richard Foster’s *Prayer* (1992) and *Celebration of the Disciplines* (1988) provide assistance with maintaining such a listening heart posture, as do Mark and Patti Virkler in their book, *Communion with God* (1990). Henry Blackaby, often quoted for his words exhorting Christians to find where God is at work and then join God there, has also recognized the importance of embedding the practice of attentiveness to God’s leading presence in the practice of daily prayer and meditation on Scripture (Blackaby and Blackaby 1998).

Discerning God’s Will in Relationship

It follows from the assertion that communal discernment is founded in Jesus’ call to discipleship that the practice is, among other things, relational in nature. It cannot occur outside of the loving relationship with Jesus Christ that we have as his disciples.

This assertion may seem like no more than stating the obvious. However, it needs to be emphasized in this theological rationale for communal discernment, because upholding the relational nature of discernment helps us to maintain the sense that we cannot discern our mission properly without a continuous link with God, rooted in loving relationship. Without this link, we can fall into assuming that the will of God is something that God hides from us until we get good at discovering it.

Depending on God's Guidance Step-by-step

If we rest in the faith that God wants to guide us into God's mission, then, as Bruce Waltke asserts, we will recognize that God "doesn't sit back and play games with his children. Instead, He offers us clear guidance for living our lives to please Him" (Waltke 1995, 59). Rose Mary Dougherty speaks to this also when she writes,

We have separated the will of God from God, and discernment has come to mean a search for God's will which we must find in a game of hide-and-seek. We often equate discernment with a skill which we must master rather than the gift of God's love which guides us home to Love. (Dougherty 1995, 25)

What if discerning God's will is not so much about looking into God's crystal ball to discern the future as it is about listening for God's guidance one step at a time? What if we assume that God is always speaking to us, urging us to choose one direction or another and equipping us to take appropriate steps in obedient response? In this way, certainty is not so much the end goal – "now I know God's will and can proceed in confidence" – as it is a by-product of trusting

that, in being attentive to God's voice, one has not only been set in the right direction but one is continuously accompanied by the Spirit of God in walking in that direction.

This kind of trusting relationship with God is demonstrated frequently in both the Old and New Testaments. The book of Job suggests that people in Biblical times, including Job and his friends, depended on good things happening to good people and bad things happening to bad people. Job struggled against this understanding of the way of things, given his first-hand experience that bad things happen to good people. His breakthrough in acquiring true wisdom occurred when God spoke to him out of the whirlwind, and engaged him in a dialogue that led ultimately to new blessing (Job 38-42).

It was through a direct listening-encounter with God, who spoke to him out of a burning bush, that Moses took the path back to Egypt from which he had fled (Exod. 3). Through an even more personal engagement on Mount Sinai, Moses heard God's words and wrote them into the Torah – the touchstone ever since for those faithful to God's covenant with Israel (Exod. 19).

God's words provided the writer of Psalm 119 with the delicious wisdom needed to discern well:

How sweet are your words to my taste;
they are sweeter than honey.
Your commandments give me understanding;
no wonder I hate every false way of life. (Ps. 119:103-104)

Such wisdom goes deep into a person's soul, and ensures that one is connected to the will of God, moving freely within boundaries that are defined by our ability

hear God's voice. The work of discerning God's will within that realm of freedom, then, is to stay within range of God's voice so that we can distinguish God's ways from other ways and thus choose a response that honours God.

King David sought to embody this way of living, demonstrating his listening relationship to God at different points in his life. His defeat of the Philistines, as described in 1 Chronicles 14, illustrates how David went to God for direction; in this situation, God told him twice not only what to do but how to do it. The second instance of David's obedient response to God's words is especially riveting: God told David to hold off with his attack until he had "heard a sound like marching feet in the tops of the balsam trees" (15). Listening was thus a hugely important element in David's ability to discern God's will and respond obediently.

Another example of the importance of listening for discernment is found in the life of Deborah, whose position parallels Moses and Samuel in that her role of judge was defined by her role as a prophet (Idestrom 2011). People came to her for judgment, knowing that she was attentive to the words of God; in her ongoing relationship with God she was able to hear God's voice as all Old Testament prophets did, and speak obediently out of what she had heard.

On the negative side, the history of the people of Israel as chronicled in the Old Testament was continuously doomed as a result of people refusing to listen to God and choosing ways that led to destruction instead of abundant life. For many of them, living as they did outside of a direct relationship with God, the wisdom of the Torah became meaningless. The poor outcome of Solomon's reign

suggests, for instance, that the wisdom he chose over riches and fame when he was young (1 Kings 3:1-15) became directed over time to discerning his own ends rather than God's.

God was not satisfied with a situation in which people relied on the Torah an external source of wisdom and discernment. Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophesied a time when God's words would dwell in all people's hearts (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 11:19), and life would be permeated by the *shalom* of God's original intent for creation, as depicted so beautifully when Jeremiah described what a restored Jerusalem would look like (32:36-44; 33). This vision for healed relationships with God, other human beings and all creation rests on the understanding that people will hear God's words as they discern God's paths, and in so doing, take up their God-given tasks in life-giving ways.

This kind of listening relationship with God is exemplified most clearly in the life of Jesus. Jesus took time apart from his disciples and the crowds following him so that he could hear God's voice distinct from the clamour around him and thus discern God's will and determine an obedient response to it. Such may have been the case, for instance, when Jesus went apart from the crowds after hearing the news of the death of John the Baptist; we can surmise that Jesus would have used this time to listen for God's words as he prayed through the implications of John's death for his own ministry.

As we sense in hearing his Gethsemane prayer, Jesus' mission to effect reconciliation, through his death and resurrection, between God and all of creation was not pre-loaded at birth; instead, as N. T. Wright suggests, it required of Jesus

a continuous straining toward hearing God's words, discerning God's ways and responding in obedience, until he came to the point that he understood and welcomed his vocation from God (Wright 1999).

With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Jesus' disciples became apostolic witnesses to the mission of God in Jesus, and they developed the practice of prayer-based discernment in doing so. A very particular example is recounted in Acts 13:1-3, when Barnabas and Saul were commissioned by disciples in Antioch to undertake their first missionary journey. Their decision came about in the context of worship, prayer and fasting, and was an obedient response to the Holy Spirit saying to them, "Dedicate Barnabas and Saul for the special work I have for them" (Acts 13:2). Hearing the words of God in the power of the Holy Spirit and responding to it transformed these disciples' relationships with God in such a way that they too came to embody relational dependence on God for correct discernment and obedient decision-making.

Implications for Discernment

As suggested by the references above to Jesus and biblical exemplars, when we rely on listening for God's words for guidance, we will – to use the phraseology of Eugene Peterson in relation to 1 John 2:27-28 – "[l]ive deeply in what [we] were taught....[l]ive deeply in Christ." We will thus avoid the temptation to look for highly detailed roadmaps that will get us to some predetermined point in the future. Instead, we will enter with God into the work of designing the roadmaps as we go. It is in this context that Alan Roxburgh invites

readers of his book, *Missional Map-making*, to follow the voice of God in responding to “the call for map-makers” (Roxburgh 2010, 16).

Relational approaches to discernment, where we rely on hearing the voice of Jesus in every step we take as explorers and cartographers, will help us to engage well in God’s mission. The task is so huge and complex that God can only relay it to us in bits and pieces at a time. Even apart from consideration of the rate of change in our ministry contexts, we cannot hope to have a comprehensive roadmap that will guide us into the future for a long period of time, because we cannot see from God’s height or understand things through God’s eyes. In these words from Isaiah:

“My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the LORD.
“And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine.
For just as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so my ways are higher than your ways
and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Adoption of the listening posture that is critical to discipleship and reflects our relational dependence on God reminds us that we are not the ones in control of the future. We cannot, therefore, enter into organizational planning with that assumption, however buried it might be under the desire to acknowledge God’s leadership.

Instead, we will be taking on practices that keep us attuned to God’s voice and that help us to distinguish between God’s voice and others’. We will be concerned less about developing a definitive roadmap and more about finding ways to ensure that we stay attuned to God’s voice, thus living out the prophecy

in Isaiah of how God's people will live after their relationship with God has been restored:

Your own ears will hear him.
Right behind you a voice will say,
"This is the way you should go,"
whether to the right or to the left. (Isaiah 30:21)

This kind of step-by-step approach to discernment requires the kind of trust in God's guidance as illustrated by the biblical characters discussed above. As noted in an interview with Victor Shepherd, trust is necessary when "God's will is discerned as God's will is done moment by moment"; conversely, the often erroneous understanding of "finding God's will" can actually become a "substitute for trusting God" (Shepherd 2011).

The recognition that discernment in general is, first of all, a matter of discipleship and, secondly, a matter of relationship – both of which require us to be listeners before we can be decision-makers – provides the foundational theological basis for practices of communal discernment, and brings us to the point of determining the principles that further constitute the theological rationale for that practice.

The Interweaving Principle

The recognition of discipleship and our relationship with Jesus as the theological starting points for discerning how we might participate in God's mission leads into the discussion of theological premises underlying the interweaving principle related to practices of communal discernment.

An understanding of the breadth of God’s mission and the call of Jesus to participate in that mission will help us to develop a practice in relation to organizational planning that recognizes that the way we do *all* things matters to God and God’s mission. It follows, therefore, that we need to listen for the voice of Jesus in all things, including organizational planning.

Creation and Missional Mandates

Theologians and reflective practitioners engaged in the “Missional Church” movement have been emphasizing the critical importance of re-ordering our missiological and ecclesiological thinking. As Darrell Guder and his associates have pointed out clearly, “we have begun to see that the church of Jesus Christ is not the purpose or goal of the gospel, but rather its instrument and witness” (Guder et al. 1998, 5). The significance of this paradigm-shifting insight will be explored further in relation to the inclusive principle below; for now, what will be examined is the mission in relation to which the church of Jesus Christ is called to act as instrument and witness.

The breadth of this mission is indicated by Guder et al. in their next premise: having established that the church is the instrument and witness of the gospel, they state, “God’s mission embraces all of creation” (5). Thus the gospel message is that God is effecting reconciliation with all of creation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is now Lord of all creation.

This statement regarding the all-creation scope of God’s mission resonates with that uttered by Abraham Kuyper, who, on the occasion of the dedication of

the Free University in Amsterdam, proclaimed that “there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: “Mine!”” (his emphasis, quoted in Naugle 2001, 1). As Kuyper contended when presenting his “Stone Lectures” at Princeton University in 1898, a truly comprehensive understanding of God’s work in the world and the call of Jesus to join God in that work starts with “the confession of the absolute Sovereignty of the Triune God; for of Him, through Him, and until Him are all things” (Kuyper 1931, 46).

The hymn to Christ’s lordship in Colossians 1, to which Kuyper alludes, rings clearly:

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.
He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation,
for through him God created everything
in the heavenly realms and on earth.
He made the things we can see
and the things we can’t see—
such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world.
Everything was created through him and for him.
He existed before anything else,
and he holds all creation together.
Christ is also the head of the church,
which is his body.
He is the beginning,
supreme over all who rise from the dead.
So he is first in everything.
For God in all his fullness
was pleased to live in Christ,
and through him God reconciled
everything to himself.
He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth
by means of Christ’s blood on the cross. (Col. 1:15-20)

It is perhaps with this hymn resounding in his ears that Dietrich Bonhoeffer states that, by leaving the monastery where the “sacred” work of God was to have been done, Martin Luther embodied the principle that “Following Jesus now had to be lived out in the midst of the world... Complete obedience to Jesus’ commandments had to be carried out in the daily world of work” (Bonhoeffer 2003, 48).

To further understand the contours of our creation-wide mission, we are well served by paying attention to the “creation mandate,” first given to us when God directed human beings to “Multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” and to “Be masters over the fish and birds and all the animals” (Gen. 1:28). Such mastery was to be exercised in the manner of tending and caring for creation (Gen. 2:15), rather than subjecting it to domination and abuse – a distortion of the creation mandate that results in the environmental degradation we see today.

Albert Wolters writes that this creation mandate entails that “We are called to participate in the ongoing creational work of God, to be God’s helper in executing to the end the blueprint for his masterpiece” (Wolters 2005, 44). While the original mandate focused on caring for the earth, the outworking of the creation mandate extended to physical construction and the construction of society. It is to this aspect of the creation mandate that Andy Crouch refers when he exhorts Christians to go beyond “engaging culture” – as if it were something outside of us – to become “culture makers”; he writes, “We want our lives – our whole lives – to matter for the gospel” (Crouch 2008, 10).

We know that the rebellion of human beings against God has led to immeasurable difficulty in carrying out the creation mandate. Adam and Eve were told by God that they would now encounter a curse in doing so – a curse manifested in pain in childbirth, in thorns and thistles and in the sweat it would take to produce food (Gen. 3:16-19).

As we see in the story of the Tower of Babel, the curse extended also to the culture making aspect of the creation mandate. When God saw that, through building this monument, the consequences of human pride in human accomplishment would become disastrous, God made it impossible for people to understand each other, and in so doing struck at the heart of the “advantage of their common language and political unity,” which made rebellious culture making possible (Gen. 11:5-7).

Despite the curse related to it, God’s call to human beings to act as responsible stewards of creation and to engage in culture making was never taken away. Instead God made it possible for human beings to regain some of what they had lost when they were exiled from the garden. Although their relationship with God had changed drastically in that they no longer walked with God in the cool of the day, God continued to connect directly to human beings, directing them to discern paths that they would not otherwise have chosen, e.g., Noah building the ark (Gen. 9-10) and Abraham leaving his family behind in Ur (Gen. 12).

The provision that God made to human beings through the law and the prophets enabled those who desired to walk in God’s paths to do more than care for the earth in responsible ways. Indeed, much of what God says to the people of

Israel focuses on the ways in which they are called to care for one another, relate to those living outside of God's covenantal promises and build the cultural edifices that were to honour God, e.g., the tabernacle and temple. Discernment of God's ways thus became critical to the endeavour to execute the creation mandate as it relates to culture making.

In Jesus Christ, God revealed the breadth of the plan for what will become total reconciliation with the earth and all who inhabit it. The restoration and healing of broken relationships between God and all of creation – effected through Jesus as Lord of all – is now the central focus of the creation mandate. As David Naugle puts it, Jesus has “achieved a cosmic redemption. Through the ministry and power of the Holy Spirit, He is restoring genuine believers to their original purposes and the entire creation back to God for our blessing and His greater glory” (Naugle 2005, 14). As Jesus' followers we are called to join this mission of God; in so doing we enfold the earlier creation mandate into the missional mandate that Jesus leads us into.

Interwoven Patterns in Discernment

Discernment is a critical element in our discipleship journeys as we seek to follow Jesus into the Kingdom that he inaugurated two thousand years ago. Keeping the creation/missional mandate in mind, we can engage in a kind of discernment that seeks God's leading in all areas of life. In the context of affirming “the basic Christian confession that there is a will of God for my life,

that can be known, and that I must seek...and act on..." (35), Wolters goes on to write,

Precisely the same considerations apply to the discernment of the general creational norms that hold for every area of human affairs. That, too, involves the perceptive experience and investigation of immediate reality, teamwork and sharing with brothers and sisters in the same field, earnest prayer for guidance and insight, constant reference to Scripture, and familiarity with its overarching themes. (Wolters 2005, 35)

If we are to engage in culture making under the redemptive banner of the Kingdom of God, then discerning how God is leading us into God's mission is critical to understanding that the realm of Jesus extends everywhere in God's creation. It's a huge task, and in undertaking it, "we want to know what Jesus wants" (Bonhoeffer 2003, 37).

If we accept that a split between what is deemed to be sacred and what is deemed to be secular makes God's mission of reconciliation with all of creation impossible, then relegating prayer to the "sacred" side of things and organizational planning to the "secular," as if they have nothing to do with one another, strikes at the heart of our efficacy as partners in God's mission. The two must be kept together in dialogical relationship and, in process terms, be woven together in meaningful ways. The point of union between them is the call to listen to God's voice in relation to both prayer and planning processes; thus, the interweaving of practices of communal discernment with organizational planning processes opens us up to being directed by God's purposes, especially when we engage in missional direction-setting activity.

The challenge in terms of process is to avoid complete assimilation or merger of two elements that are in dialogical relationship; this would diminish the distinctiveness of each part. Instead, by interweaving them in an intentional way over time, the two elements serve to shape and inform one another in a way that heightens both their distinctiveness and their connectivity.

By interweaving prayer and planning processes, practices of communal discernment help us to stay in relationship with God, always listening and responding in obedience to the voice of Jesus as we enter into the work of discerning our organizational futures – recognizing that the first and the last Word resides with God and not ourselves.

The interweaving principle also addresses the dilemma that many leaders of Christian churches and organizations face when entering into organizational planning: they are often expected to choose between an approach that some would consider overly “spiritual” or one that others would consider “worldly,” because of its reference to business practices.

Adherents to the former side of the duality would claim that a business approach to planning negates the importance of praying for God’s wisdom, while adherents to the latter side would argue that reliance on prayer alone will not result in a coherent and rational plan for the future. While the polarity is somewhat overstated in that most would nod in the direction of the other, it can nonetheless lead to situations where, on the one hand, those who can best lay claim to having “heard from God” set the direction for everyone else without

question or review, while on the other hand, prayer plays at best a perfunctory role and at worst is invoked as a blessing on a *fait accompli*.

Pitting the prayer approach and business approach to organizational planning against one another is dangerous not only because of potentially flawed outcomes; it also demonstrates underlying adherence to the dichotomy between “sacred” and “secular,” which does radical damage to our ability to engage in God’s mission. The practice of communal discernment can help to overcome the split imposed by some between God’s work and our work as humans in the everyday functioning of our lives. When embarked on in the context of organizational planning, the practice can help us to recognize – through the intentional interweaving of certain prayer disciplines and approaches to strategic conversation – that God leads in all aspects of our organizational future, not just in those that we may deem to be “spiritual.”

The Inclusive Principle

The theological examination of the interweaving principle of practices of communal discernment alludes to the trap into which a group can fall if it depends for direction solely on the one who appears to have the best pipeline to God. The danger on the other side of the supposed polarity can be a parallel one: the group can come to rely on the person who is most persuasive on the grounds of logic and rationality.

If we agree that prayer and business approaches to missional direction-setting must be interwoven, we must still address the issue of how to ensure that

all members of the group take full responsibility for hearing God's voice in prayer and in conversation about organizational development. This section of the theological rationale for communal discernment suggests that shared responsibility for discerning missional direction begins with recognizing that every person in the group is a disciple of Jesus; every person is thus engaged in relationship with Jesus and is invited to adopt the listening posture. Having said that, if they are to be a missional community, then each of those persons must do so together and not in isolation.

The broadening of responsibility for listening for God's direction is a safeguard against a false or misguided hearing. Indeed, the establishment of the church through the Holy Spirit at Pentecost has the effect of, among other things, ensuring the efficacy of the apostolic witness to the risen Christ, who continues to call people to follow him into God's mission for the world.

Mission in Community

We can only discern and walk in God's ways insofar as we are reconciled as individuals to God through Jesus Christ, and thus are introduced into the ministry of reconciliation:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5:17-19)

While it affects us as individuals, this ministry is not exercised by us as individuals; instead, it is given to us in community – that community being, of

course, the church. Van Gelder puts it this way: “God...creates the through the Spirit, who calls, gathers, and sends the church into the world to participate in God’s mission” (Van Gelder 2007, 18). Participation in God’s mission defines the vocations of our churches and ministry organizations within the larger vocation of the church of all times and in all places.

The recognition that the mission of the church precedes and describes the nature of the church prevents us from moving toward a cozy interpretation of “community.” What we need to adopt is a sense of shared missional purpose with others in the group – those who share the ordeals and co-celebrate the gains as comrades would. This sense of *communitas*, as Alan Hirsch would put it (Hirsch 2006), correlates with Bonhoeffer’s view of Christian community: it is defined not by our personal relationships with one another, no matter how deep they are, but rather by our shared relationships with Jesus in our midst – the Jesus who calls us and whose voice we must be listening to together (Bonhoeffer 1954).

Our individual participation in God’s mission is usually subsumed into the broader vocations of a local church or ministry organization. Furthermore, the calling of those who have leadership roles in such communities does not delineate the overall calling of those communities. In his contribution to the book, *Treasure in Clay Jars*, George Hunsberger underscores this secondary relationship of our personal vocations to the broader vocation of the group when he writes about the interplay between discernment and vocation:

When attentive to the voice of God, a congregation discerns not only that vocation that is shared across the whole church, but also its particular calling to express that vocation in its own place and time. This is

discerned and followed together by a community. Its vocation is so much more than the sum total of all the personal vocations that, in fact, it ends up being the other way around. *Personal* vocation is shaped and molded in the context of a community that has clarity about *its* vocation. (his emphasis, Barrett et al. 2004, 38)

The assumption that one person can speak on behalf of all others in the community when it comes to discerning its vocation is likely flawed on the ground, among others, that few people would be able to extract their own personal vocation from that of the larger group.

Some might argue, however, that the prophetic function, which is still vital in the church today, necessitates an individual approach. While this may be true in some circumstances, the post-Pentecost ideal for the church would suggest that prophetic words, while they often come to a person individually, are best understood in community. In this sense we can celebrate a significant aspect of Pentecost, namely the undoing of God's curse at Babel: in reference to Genesis 11:6, we have regained the advantage of our common language and unity.

A careful balance is needed here, of course. There are times when "group-think" overtakes a community and individual expressions of differences in opinion are not welcomed. Smith refers to the balance that is needed in approaching communal discernment, when he says, on the one hand, "We need to know, corporately, as part of our patterns of governance and decision making, how to attend to the Spirit and know what the Spirit is saying to the community as a whole" (Smith 2003, 17). At the same time, Smith urges leaders in Christian communities to recognize that God speaks through the individuals in that group (28), and challenges them to discard their discomfort "with the idea that the

individual Christian, with a mind informed by the Scriptures, can truly know the voice of Jesus in his or her own heart and mind. They [should no longer] believe that it is their responsibility to tell their fellow Christians what they should hear and how they should act” (29).

Communal Decision-making in the Book of Acts

Examples of listening for God’s voice communally abound in the book of Acts. In some cases it is clear that the Holy Spirit plays a direct role in the decision-making efforts of individuals and groups in the early church.

We start with an example from before Pentecost to set up the contrast. When the eleven disciples confront the task of choosing a twelfth disciple to replace Judas, they drew lots to make their decision. While this is done in the context of continual prayer (Acts 1:14) and in reference to Scripture (20), the idea of the Holy Spirit as a person in the decision-making process does not appear until after Pentecost.

The simultaneous outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the group of believers gathered together at that time sets the stage for an approach to discerning the voice of Jesus that is best undertaken communally. The main character on that stage is, it seems, the Holy Spirit, who is often referred to in the Book of Acts in personal terms, e.g., when Peter confronts Ananias with the accusation, “You lied to the Holy Spirit,” (5:3) and when the Holy Spirit tells Philip to speak with the Ethiopian eunuch (8:29) and Peter to go to the home of Cornelius (11:12).

This same direct involvement is evident in references to communal decision-making. The sense is that of the Holy Spirit having a seat with the decision-makers as they gather together in worship and prayer. One example of this is found in Acts 13:2-4, where the Holy Spirit says to a group of worshippers in Antioch, “Dedicate Barnabas and Saul for the special work I have for them.” Interestingly, after more fasting and prayer – suggesting that the members of the group had taken the time to test each other’s understanding of the Holy Spirit’s message – the text reads that “the men laid their hands on [Barnabas and Saul] and sent them on their way.” Their sending action is not credited to them alone, however, for immediately afterward we read, “Sent out by the Holy Spirit, Saul and Barnabas went down to the seaport of Seleucia and then sailed for the island of Cyprus.” This dual reference indicates that the act of commissioning of Saul and Barnabas was undertaken by the worshippers in Antioch and by the Holy Spirit, thus suggesting that the act had the weight of two authorities behind it.

Another striking passage related to communal discernment and the Holy Spirit as an active participant in it takes place in the context of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). Here the newly formed church is faced with a major doctrinal challenge that threatens its unity; it is perhaps significant that, as it relates to the inclusion of Gentiles in the church, this issue is one that relates profoundly to the inclusive principle.

As Paul and Barnabas spoke with the elders in Jerusalem, all present “listened quietly” (12) to their arguments and testimony in favour of full inclusion of Gentiles in the life of the church. James then stood up and offered the

resolution to the issue, based on his understanding that the direction Paul and Barnabas were taking agreed “with what the prophets predicted” (15). Although the account of the Council proceedings does not describe a direct role for the Holy Spirit during the meeting, in his letter to the churches following the meeting about the Council’s decision, James states that it “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (28). Clearly James and the others in the Council had the sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit when they were discerning their way through their dilemma.

The references to communal decision-making in Acts 13 and 15 indicate these critical elements to discernment: prayer (accompanied in the first case by fasting), conversation, Scripture and the presence of the Holy Spirit. These elements are essential to maintaining the discipleship postures and dialogical relationships that are foundational to practices of communal discernment and also to the interweaving and inclusive dynamic of the practice. The final area of exploration in terms of theological rationale will attempt to demonstrate how these elements relate to the incarnational aspect of that dynamic.

Incarnational Principle

Our participation in God’s mission of reconciliation and restoration calls us to new ways of walking with God that are made possible through God’s Word in Jesus Christ and God’s Word in Scripture, mediated in both cases through the Holy Spirit. Our missional call in carrying out the creation/culture making task before us is enabled by the “Word become flesh” in Jesus Christ (John 1). As the opening verses of the Gospel of John indicate so clearly, the Word incarnated in

Jesus is the same Word present in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth:

In the beginning the Word already existed. He was with God, and he was God. He was in the beginning with God. He created everything there is. Nothing exists that he didn't make. (John 1:1-3)

God's Spirit makes it possible for human beings to discern the paths blazed by Jesus Christ in his ongoing work of creation and re-creation in such a way that we can join in this work. Such discernment requires that we depend on the Holy Spirit to make known to us God's work in the world as it is substantiated for us through Scripture. Victor Shepherd points to this dual focus in discernment in his book on John Calvin, who insisted that the power of the Holy Spirit is substantiated for us by God's Word. Writes Shepherd,

For Calvin...the Spirit is the power of the Word while the Word is the substance of the Spirit. Power devoid of holy substance is destructive; substance devoid of holy power is inert (Shepherd 2009, 30).

Jesus Christ Incarnate in Community

The practice of communal discernment assumes that when a community listens for the voice of Jesus through an interwoven process of prayer and planning, a Christian community is listening to the One who is present in its midst. As alluded to above, Bonhoeffer reminds us in *Life Together* that in a Christian community Jesus is the medium through which all relationships pass and the cohering principle through which all relationships are bonded. He writes, "God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship...long before we

entered into common life with [other Christians]” (Bonhoeffer 1954, 28).

When Jesus Christ is present in our midst in an incarnational sense – for, as Jesus assures us, “where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them” (Matt. 18:20) – we have the foundation we need for true fellowship. Even so, as Bonhoeffer warns, that fellowship must be understood as being indirect:

Because Christ stands between me and others, I dare not desire direct fellowship with them...I must release the other person from every attempt of mine to regulate, coerce, and dominate him with my love...I must leave him his freedom to be Christ's; I must meet him as the person that he already is in Christ's eyes...Human love constructs its own image of the other person...Spiritual love recognizes the true image of the other person which he has received from Jesus Christ; the image that Jesus Christ himself embodied and would stamp upon all men. (Bonhoeffer 1954, 35-36)

The affirmation of faith that Jesus is present with us in our organizational planning connects to the mystery of the “Word made flesh” (John 1:1-18). He who participated in the creation of the world, we read in John's witness to the Gospel, has come to live with us and shed his light into every situation of our lives. The faith-affirmation of the Word incarnated in Jesus ties in closely with an incarnational understanding of Scripture – the idea that God's Word becomes alive for us, through the power of the Holy Spirit, in the words we read on the written page.

This expectation ought to be the one that we take with us when approaching Scripture at all times. However, in doing so we need to make the distinction between Scripture and the triune God who acts in relation to it. Pope Benedict XIV's exhortation in *Verbum Domini* conveys this caution well:

[W]hile in the Church we greatly venerate the sacred Scriptures, the Christian faith is not a “religion of the book”; Christianity is the “religion of the word of God,” not [in reference to Bernard of Clairvaux] of “a written and mute word, but of the incarnate and living Word.” (Benedict XIV 2010, 18)

Incarnation in Relation to Scripture

To talk about Scripture coming alive for us presupposes that the Triune God is in some sense present in Scripture. Wright reminds us that while God’s word is closely tied to Scripture, it is not bound by it. He points to the “powerful idea of God’s ‘word,’ not as a synonym for the written scriptures, but as a strange personal presence, creating, judging, healing, recreating” (Wright 2005, 38).

We can say that Jesus as the risen Christ is also present in, although not limited to, Scripture. Jesus’ presence, mediated by the Holy Spirit, is referred to by Hendrik Hart in *Setting Our Sights by the Morning Star*, when he writes about “the guidance and presence of the Word of God in Jesus (Word Incarnate), the Spirit (who is the Spirit of the Word), and the Bible (the inscripturated Word)” (Hart 1989, 166).

Because, in this instance, Hart is concerned with inspiring us to trust what Scripture tells us about the light that Jesus sheds on our way, he goes on to say that this is difficult for many of us, because our “inherited tradition of Christianity” [in reference to Calvinism]...has attempted to inspire objective certainty, as a result of which trust is itself mistrusted” (166). This observation hearkens back to the discussion above about what we mean by talking of “finding

God's will"; Hart too is encouraging us to abandon the desire for the kind of roadmaps that give us supposed objective certainty.

Instead of looking for outside sources to affirm Scripture and provide that sense of objective certainty, the adoption of an incarnational understanding of Scripture will give us the trust and assurance we need that, through the work of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is present with us as we listen to God's words in Scripture.

Such trust and assurance in the presence of Jesus is critical to discernment; if we approach Scripture without it, we will very likely miss out on the power of the Word that is in some mysterious way related to Scripture. Wright speaks of this in relation to the Apostle Paul's expression that "The gospel is God's power to salvation' (Romans 1:16...)" (Wright 2005, 49). Similarly, J. Todd Billings, in *The Word of God for the People of God*, draws on the work of Kierkegaard and Barth to discuss the idea that "God's word received through the instrument of Scripture does not just give information about God, but it mediates the powerful *action* of God." In reference to Herman Bavinck, an early twentieth-century Dutch theologian, Billings elaborates on his understanding of the power of the Word as follows:

God "is always present in his word," such that the word "is never separate from God, from Christ, from the Holy Spirit." Thus the word of God performs actions in God's own power: "The word that proceeds from the mouth of God is indeed always a power accomplishing that for which God sends it forth" (Billings 2010, 206).

The following reference from Isaiah 55 appropriately underscores this examination of the incarnation principle in relation to Scripture, as we read God's words in Scripture telling us:

“Come to me with your ears wide open.
Listen, and you will find life...
“The rain and snow come down from the heavens
and stay on the ground to water the earth.
They cause the grain to grow,
producing seed for the farmer
and bread for the hungry.
It is the same with my word.
I send it out, and it always produces fruit.
It will accomplish all I want it to,
and it will prosper everywhere I send it.” (Is. 55:3, 10-11)

Summary

This chapter has asserted that the theological rationale for the practice of communal discernment rests on two foundational pillars: the practice is rooted in Jesus’ call to us to be his disciples and follow him into participation in God’s mission of reconciliation, and we understand that discerning this call is first and foremost a matter of staying in dialogical relationship with Jesus on a step-by-step basis.

The chapter continued with an exploration of three principles that emerge from the two foundational pillars: the interweaving, inclusive and incarnational principles. The first of these principles seeks to bridge the divide between “sacred” and “secular” that prohibits us from effective discernment of God’s mission in the world. Secondly, the principle of inclusion suggests that our reliance on hearing the voice of Jesus extends to our understanding of missional direction in community; we hear that voice best when, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are gathered with others in the presence of Jesus.

Finally, in light of the incarnational principle, we can trust in the power of Scripture to guide us in our communal discernment efforts, because we can rely on Jesus' incarnational presence in relation to Scripture. As a result, we can expect to experience the power of God's words through Scripture in relation to the matter that is requiring discernment.

As will be demonstrated in the chapters following, the interweaving, inclusive and incarnational principles, which have been examined from a theological perspective thus far, also provide a conceptual framework for interpreting the research undertaken in relation to precedent literature and exemplars (Chapter Three) and the project described in Chapters Four and Five.

CHAPTER THREE

PRECEDENT LITERATURE AND EXEMPLARS

Chapter Three of this thesis examines literature and exemplars that relate to practices of communal discernment in the context of organizational planning. The literature and exemplars that have been chosen for review suggest, at some level at least, a resonance with the interweaving, inclusive and incarnational themes explored in Chapter Two.

The first part of the chapter looks at literature developed especially in the context of business practices. Various authors point to the need for approaches to organizational planning that break out of traditional, rationalist frameworks, primarily by way of bringing reflection-based conversation into the process.

The second part of the chapter builds on the assumption that non-traditional frameworks are needed in organizational planning in all types of groups, including Christian ones, and examines literature that proposes the feasibility of interweaving prayer and planning in Christian churches and organizations. This section also considers the implications for leadership in Christian churches and organizations that seek to adopt a “learning community” approach to organizational planning.

Finally, the third part of the chapter looks at exemplars of historic Christian communities that have practiced some form of communal discernment.

Connections to the interweaving, inclusive and incarnational principles will be noted throughout the chapter. As will be demonstrated in

the case of the literature review, these principles operate implicitly in both the business and Christian church/organization environments. In some cases, the principles also operate explicitly in a business setting; Margaret Benefiel's work offers one such example of business writing that attempts to bring spiritual disciplines into the workplace:

A verb in noun's clothing, soul is how "the human spirit, fully engaged" is realized in the real world. Soul at work is the way that this manifestation exhibits itself in the world of everyday economic work and how purposes and practices combine to create a workplace that embraces fully engaged human spirits. (Benefiel 2005, 10)

Another introductory observation to be made is that both types of literature in this review move toward the realization that organizational planning is most effective within the "learning community" environment, as described by Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline*. The exemplars reviewed in the third section of this chapter suggest that a learning community benefits from and enhances practices of communal discernment.

Reflective Approaches to Organizational Planning

The practice of communal discernment as discussed in Chapters Four and Five differs in significant ways from the kind of reflective approach to decision-making practiced in business environments. Yet, significant overlap does exist; indeed, some of the literature developed for business practices is instructive for the kind of communal discernment practiced in Christian churches or organizations, especially in pointing out the need for non-traditional ways of approaching organizational planning.

The Impact of Uncertainty

Some business writers are positing the argument that the rapid pace of change in business environments necessitates an approach to organizational planning that assumes nothing can be forecast with certainty. In *20/20 Foresight*, Hugh Courtney makes the case for “embracing” uncertainty, rather than trying to develop forecasts that turn out to be meaningless (Courtney 2001, 3). In the same vein, Henry Mintzberg points out the limitations of relying solely on traditional planning methods in times of uncertainty. He advises instead that organizations combine “intended” and “deliberate” strategy with “emergent” strategy, “where a realized pattern was not expressly intended” (Mintzberg 1994, 25).

Those whom Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman and Michael Quinn Patton call “social innovators” will actually “eschew clear, specific and measurable goals” for moving into the future, “because clarity, specificity and measurability are limiting and can lead to tunnel vision” (Westley, Zimmerman and Patton 2007, 83-84). Instead, they will rely on “developmental evaluation,” which allows for “periodic reflection” and “standing still” (84) – stances that are necessary if the patterns that Mintzberg writes about are to be realized.

Organic Understandings of Organizational Development

As suggested by the authors examined so far, organizational planning that is oriented less on future predictions, which rarely come true, and more on patterns emerging from the past and present, requires strong reflection-oriented

components. Such approaches often begin with some version of “discovery” where the planning participants are encouraged to ask questions, such as, “What has worked well for us in the past? What are we doing that is having positive outcomes and that we should build on?” (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2003, 140). In this realm of organizational planning literature, several key assumptions underlie the belief that in order to move forward a group should pursue a line of inquiry that emphasizes the positive, instead of using the negative as the starting point.

David Cooperrider, the founder of the “Appreciative Inquiry” approach to organizational development, and Diana Whitney demonstrate these assumptions, when they state:

Human systems grow in the direction of what they persistently ask questions about, and this propensity is strongest and most sustainable when the means and ends of inquiry are positively correlated. The single most important action a group can take to liberate the human spirit and consciously construct a better future is to make the positive core the common and explicit property of all. (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005, 9)

Here we see the emphasis on inquiry, followed by the focus on the positive (or the “appreciative”), ending with the expectation that all members of the group will be participating in the effort. In between we see the even deeper assumption that an appreciative inquiry approach, when undertaken by all members of an organization, will “liberate the human spirit and consciously construct a better future.”

The belief that human beings are capable of constructing a better future if they are enabled to do so through proper facilitation processes echoes themes

sounded by others who espouse an organic, as opposed to mechanical, view of organizational development. Margaret Wheatley propounds this view when she writes,

Life is systems seeking. It seeks organization. Organization is a naturally occurring phenomenon. Self-organization is a powerful force that creates the systems we observe and testifies to a world that knows how to organize from the inside out....

... Life seeks organization, but it uses messes to get there.
Organization is a process, not a structure. (Wheatley 2005, 25, 27)

Proponents of “Complexity Theory” operate with a similar set of assumptions, bringing to the fore as they do the idea of order emerging out of chaos. The positive forces that should be maximized for future projection purposes can be seen, in terms of complex adaptive systems theory, as those which are already operating within a social system to bring order out of chaos or, perhaps more accurately, those that are at play in the “region on the edge of order and chaos” (Warren, Franklin and Streeter 1998, 365) where adaptive change takes place.

Adaptive Leadership and Learning Communities

The interweaving principle comes into play especially in situations when the interpretation of feedback loops becomes critical in understanding how positive forces for change are bringing order out of chaos. As Ronald Heifetz asserts, “adaptive leadership” is needed for such a task. Adaptive leaders, he says, understand that the discovery of positive forces for change or the interpretation of feedback loops that give insight into the order that is emerging

from chaos depend not on technical, quick-fix solutions but on “living in the disequilibrium” in which adaptive systems learning takes place (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky 2009, 28-31). It is in this zone that the cycle of “observation, interpretation and intervention” is both most creative and most productive (Heifetz et al., 32-36).

The inclusive principle comes into play at this point, because adaptive leadership works best in systems where all members are able to participate in the process of discovering the basis for future potential and developing the means for organizing in the direction of positive change. If, as its proponents profess, Appreciative Inquiry “brings out the best of people, encourages them to see and support the best of others, and generates unprecedented cooperation and innovation” (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2003, 19), then building learning communities will be seen to be a key strategic component in effective organizational development.

Peter Senge, likely the most well-known of proponents of the “learning organization,” is especially strong on this point when he envisions the development of learning communities that will bring the wisdom of all stakeholders to bear when engaging in what he calls “systems thinking” – the kind of reflection-based thinking that is needed once the group recognizes that quick-fix solutions in one area of the system tend to create new problems in other areas. In times of uncertainty and complexity, all members of the group need to be engaged in understanding the larger system of which they are a part; therefore, all

should be engaged in a learning process that builds shared paradigms, vision and practices that can be carried effectively into the future (Senge 1994).

Those that are designated as the leaders in such a community need to rely on the adaptive learning that continually takes place among all of that community's members. Often, however, such learning is not heard. Thus, the effort to weave widespread listening practices into organizational planning becomes critical. The interpretation of feedback loops and progression through various planning stages demands communication between all of those who are affected.

Interweaving, Inclusive and Incarnational Dynamic

If the assumption in a learning community is that the wisdom of all members of the group needs to be heard, then we may see the interweaving and inclusive principles coming together as that learning community is developed.

It is important to note that by themselves listening/reflection-oriented approaches to organizational planning lack a means by which the line of inquiry can be judged to be of value or not. There is no explicit plumb line to measure against, no vision from either inside or outside the group to provide orientation. It could be said, therefore, that the approaches to organizational planning described in the literature thus far lack evidence of the incarnational principle at play.

Perhaps it is in recognition of this sort of lack that some writers have been writing about the "soul" in the workplace. Although the content of "soul" in this

sense does not explicitly correlate with a Christian understanding of Jesus' presence in the workplace, such works recognize the importance of having something beyond the organization to give it fuller purpose and meaning.

Stephen Covey (*The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and *The Eighth Habit*) and Robert Quinn (*Deep Change*) are two examples of authors who suggest that leaders need to go beyond reflection on empirical data when engaged in designing approaches to change; instead, they need to draw on their deepest beliefs and convictions in order to break out of a self-determining and thus amoral spiral of iterative change management.

Benefiel, a theologian writing for workplace audiences, provides key insight into the need for an outside reference point to be brought into organizational development processes. Demonstrating both the interweaving and incarnational principles at play, Benefiel states that as she examined various organizations, she found that “the listening spiritual traditions in which [she] had been trained resonated with the organizational thinking which had started to emerge in business and management circles” (11).

Benefiel's emphasis on listening and discernment is one that is useful for those facilitating a strategic planning process in various contexts, whether professedly Christian or not. An interview with Peter Dickens confirms this observation; Dickens refers to his facilitation approach as “appreciative reflection,” thus bringing together the Appreciative Inquiry emphasis on the positive (what's working well?) into a reflective practice, which he interweaves into the conversation on strategic direction (Dickens 2010).

To sum up this part of the literature review, we see that the emphasis in the literature on the difficulty of using traditional strategic planning approaches in the context of organizational development necessitates a move away from planning approaches that depend on visions of the future (and thus require “visionary” leaders) to those that rely on reflection on current realities (and thus require “adaptive” leaders).

The interweaving of reflective practices, which include strong listening elements, into organizational planning approaches demonstrates the recognition of the need to develop learning communities, which intentionally interweave listening and reflection into organizational planning on an inclusive basis. In some cases, such learning communities also welcome an incarnational element, if we take the latter to mean the attempt to draw on moral forces beyond the organization.

Prayer and Planning in Christian Churches and Organizations

As a Christian writer who recognizes the same dilemmas as those described by the likes of Mintzberg and Senge, Tim Keel resonates with the view that “coherent patterns” can be discerned by a learning community in situations where a “master plan” is not advisable. As such he bridges well into the examination of literature written for a specifically Christian audience. Keel writes,

[L]ife emerges in unique ways when an environment is created that allows for bottom-up and top-down interactions; out of these interactions simple order arises without any kind of master plan. These *coherent patterns* are signs of life that can be recognized in a dynamic process that allows for all the players in a system to be engaged in creative processes. (his emphasis, Keel 2007, 203)

Similarly, Smith resonates with the need to avoid a master-plan approach to planning when he refers specifically to the possibility of using Appreciative Inquiry in organizational planning within a church context. This approach, he writes, “may well be one of the most significant means by which we could facilitate communal discernment, because it is precisely the kind of tool we can use to open up a community to the witness of the Spirit” (Smith 2003, 245).

Incorporating Reflective Practices in Christian Contexts

In *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (2003), Gil Rendle and Alice Mann emphasize the importance of weaving prayer and reflective conversation into the planning process. They echo the theme related to the irrelevance of devising a “master plan” – something which many leaders have traditionally felt they must have when managing change and transition – when they write,

It is not the plan that will change people and give direction to the congregation. It is *the conversation* of the people with one another and with God – that is a part of the planning process – that changes people. ...The task of the leader is simply to *structure* the conversation. (their emphasis, Rendle and Mann 2003, xviii-xix)

As Christian leaders come to view the development of missional communities as more of an organic process than a mechanical one – a process that is assisted by listening/learning practices and adaptive leadership – they will be in a position to participate in the creation/missional mandate in a more intentional way. Christian leaders will insist on organizational development processes that

enable the group to discover its “positive core” or, more aptly, its particular call in the *missio Dei*, when it undertakes to follow God’s lead through discernment of where the positive forces are already at play.

Lectio Divina as a Form of Listening Prayer

In a Christian context we would be more specific about those “positive forces,” asking questions such as, “Where is the Holy Spirit in all of this? How can we be guided by God and know that we are being guided by God?” Communal discernment practices can help us to deal with such questions, because of their emphasis on the importance of bringing Scripture-focused listening prayer, together with an appreciative approach to strategic conversation, into organizational planning processes. Participants in communal discernment ask questions that get at not just, “What’s working well?”, but also, and more importantly, “Where is God at work in God’s mission?” This question brings the incarnational principle into play; without it, a church or ministry organization could assume that what is working well is *ipso facto* what should be carried into the future.

What Christian leaders and facilitators might find helpful in an organizational planning context is, therefore, a specific kind of prayer – prayer that is focused on discerning God’s leadership into the future, is practiced in the context of community and emphasizes the central role of Scripture. Discernment prayer of a prophetic nature can, of course, take place outside of the bounds of community and Scripture; Christian tradition over a 2000-year time span

suggests, however, that such bounds can (although not always) provide a necessary counterbalance to the individually-exercised gift of prophecy.

Discernment is by its nature all about sorting – sorting between that which is helpful and that which is not or, more importantly, that which tends towards good and that which tends towards evil. In relation to discernment of a spiritual nature, Mary Margaret Funk writes, “To discern is to sort out, in the light of the whole, that which is of God” (Funk 2001, 129). Discernment prayer brings us before God, asking for God’s Spirit to assist us in this all-important sorting process.

One form of discernment prayer, which is Scripture-focused and can be practiced either individually or in community, is *lectio divina* (Latin for “holy reading”). While other forms of discernment prayer – Gospel contemplation and Ignatian prayer, for instance – are helpful alternatives, it is the propensity of *lectio divina* toward effective listening and reflecting, within the context of community and Scripture focus, that makes it an ideal prayer discipline for practice within a learning community.

Lectio divina has traditionally been practiced in relation to various kinds of devotional writing, as well as Scripture. As various authors describe it, *lectio divina* is a way of reading, or listening to what is being read, that depends less on analytical faculties and more on intuitive ways of knowing (Binz 2008; Pennington 1998; Bianchi 1998; Funk 2001).

A contemporary practice of *lectio divina* might involve reading aloud a passage three times, with a different question associated with each round of

reading/listening.² When applied in a discernment context, readers or listeners are attentive during the first reading to discovering a word or phrase that especially resonates with them. During the second, they pray for insight into why that particular word or phrase may have significance for them, and during the third, they seek ways in which the significant word or phrase might apply to the particular matter that requires discernment. When associated with Scripture reading, *lectio divina* has enormous potential for weaving discernment prayer into organizational planning.

Christian leaders in learning communities

In *The Missional Leader* (2006), Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk take on leaders who want to dictate the future when they castigate those who have adopted an “entrepreneurial model” for congregational leadership. They say,

In this book we offer an alternative model of the missional leader who is a cultivator of an environment that discerns God’s activities among the congregation and in its context. It is leadership that cultivates the practice of indwelling Scripture and discovering places for experiment and risk as people discover that the Spirit of God’s life giving future in Jesus is among them. (their emphasis, Roxburgh and Romanuk 2006, 27)

Roxburgh continues the theme of orienting leaders away from traditional approaches to organizational development in *Missional Map-making: Skills for Leading in Times of Transition* (2010). He relates the need leaders sense around coming up with a plan to the modernist mindset, which asserts the possibility of gaining “control and management of the world in order to predict the outcomes”

² This way of engaging in *lectio divina* was first introduced to me by way of Dr. David Sherbino’s course, “Spiritual Formations,” taught by him as an MDiv requirement at Tyndale Seminary.

(Roxburgh 2010, 64). Instead, counsels Roxburgh, leaders need to root themselves in the biblical narratives that witness to the fact that, in times of uncertainty, “the Spirit gives God’s people new imagination” (34).

Recognizing that maps into the future are not drawn up ahead of time but are rather made “on the journey” (37), Roxburgh moves from the starting point that “God works through people by the Spirit, and this involves the best uses of our minds, organizational skills, and leadership imaginations,” to say, “The task for leaders is...about how we cultivate environments that call forth and release the mission-shaped imagination of the people of God in a specific place and time” (77).

Bringing communal discernment very specifically into discerning missional direction is Van Gelder, who writes in *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* that a missional understanding of the nature and purpose of the church leads congregations to explore their missional context. As a consequence, “[l]eadership...focuses on discerning the Spirit’s leading and discovering ways to implement ministry in their particular context in light of that leading” (Van Gelder 2007,19).

For leaders to lead others in discerning the Spirit’s leading they need to adopt a stance that is characterized by humility and openness to learning from the Spirit and from others as well. Henri Nouwen’s *In the Name of Jesus* (1989) describes this kind of leadership posture well, as does Ruth Haley Barton’s *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* (2008).

Both Van Gelder and Barton spend significant time in their books describing in effect the kind of learning community in which communal discernment is readily practiced. Barton defines discernment as “the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and the activity of God both personally and in community” (Barton 2008, 192-193). She makes a very helpful distinction between the “habit” of discernment and the “practice” of discernment; without the presence of the former in the lives of community-members, she says, the latter will be “empty and impotent” (196). Further,

The habit of discernment is important preparation for those times when we need to make decisions and are called to intentionally and actively seek God’s will. During such times the spiritual leader calls people into the *practice* of discernment (her emphasis, 196).

Barton’s chapter on discernment in community includes specific process steps that parallel to some extent those that are outlined by Van Gelder. Both authors stress the importance of listening and of incorporating prayer into the process; neither, however, speak specifically about Scripture-focused listening prayer.

Several other books have been written in recent years that introduce specific direction around bringing discernment processes in various forms into organizational planning as undertaken by Christian churches and organizations. These include Oswald and Friedrich, Jr., *Discerning Your Congregation’s Future* (1996); Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together* (1997); Rendle and Mann, *Holy Conversations* (2003); Weaver Glick, *In Tune with God* (2004); and Standish, *Becoming a Blessed Church* (2005). Again, while all of these books

emphasize the importance of bringing prayer and listening into the process of organizational decision-making, and of including a large group of people in so doing, they do not point to a specific method of introducing Scripture-focused listening prayer into the process.

Communal Discernment Practices in Church History

The recent literature emerging around the need for different approaches to organizational planning in Christian churches and organizations might suggest that the practice of communal discernment is a new development in the Christian church – or perhaps a practice that has been rediscovered, given the biblical examples in the book of Acts. As this part of the chapter will seek to illustrate, however, Christians have been practicing discernment in community in various ways throughout the history of the church.

For the purposes of this thesis, the particular examples chosen to demonstrate this point will be drawn from practices exemplified in various centuries of church history, including Benedictine monastic communities (6th century); the Society of Jesus (or “Jesuits,” 16th century); the Quaker and Wesleyan traditions (17th and 18th centuries); and the theological seminary led by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Finkenwalde, Germany (20th century). It is worth pointing out that the practices demonstrated by all of these examples continue to this day.

Benedictine Monastic Communities

In their book, *Longing for God* (2009), which describes paths of Christian devotion that date back to the Early Church Fathers and go through the medieval, Reformation and modern periods of church history, Richard Foster and Gayle Beebe explain the ground-breaking impact that Benedict of Nursia (480-547) had on the history of the church in Western Europe. Where individuals had been practicing a hermitic style of devotion to God, in isolation from community of any kind, Benedict introduced a systematic and communal approach to welcoming those who wished to devote their lives to Christian service. His establishment of monastic communities shaped the structure and nature of “corporate religious life” in a revolutionary way – a way that continues into the present day as men and women continue to gather themselves into what Benedict called “schools for the Lord’s service” (Foster and Beebe 2009, 224).

According to Foster and Beebe, the basic approach to this communal form of monasticism, while new to Western Europe, was exported from the Eastern church by John Cassian (360-435), who migrated from Constantinople to western Gaul via Egypt, where he was profoundly influenced by the Desert Fathers (Foster and Beebe 2009, 206). Cassian in turn influenced Benedict; *The Rule of St. Benedict*, write Foster and Beebe, “distills many of Cassian’s thoughts... including how to order the monastic life” (205).

In the *Rule*, we see Benedict address one aspect of the monastic life as follows: “Listen readily to holy reading” (Fry 1982, 28). Indeed, the *Rule* begins

with the admonition to listen. This quality is essential to the stance required in communal discernment: “To listen closely...is one of the most difficult things in the world, and yet it is essential if we mean to find the God whom we are seeking” (de Waal 2001, 43).

Listening in the broad sense is accompanied in the case of Benedictine communities by listening in the specific sense of participating in the practice of *lectio divina* (“holy reading”). This practice was, according to Foster and Beebe, a critical element in Benedictine monastic life, fostering as it did “fellowships of nurturing, caring accountability” (224).

Although leadership in Benedictine communities came clearly from the abbot, the expectation was that he too would be a listener; the *Rule* states, “the abbot must never teach or decree or command anything that would deviate from the Lord’s instructions” (21). However, the sense that all members of the community are able to listen to God’s instructions equally well, and thus able to participate in decision-making, is absent from what we can read in the *Rule*.

While the practice in contemporary Benedictine communities has nevertheless changed over time to become much more collaborative in terms of decision-making (Sister Constance Joanna, SSJD 2006), the small-group gatherings typified in Jesuit, Quaker and Wesleyan traditions demonstrate a broader application of communal discernment than that typified in Benedictine monastic communities.

The Society of Jesus

Practices of communal discernment that are interwoven with direction-setting are clearly exhibited within the Society of Jesus. The Jesuits, as they are more often known, developed a way of reaching consensus that incorporated a particular way of screening the results of communal reflection in relation to a pending decision. Pierre Wolff describes this method as “screening with indifference” (Wolff 2003).

Here the Jesuits draw on one of the teachings of their founder, Ignatius of Loyola, whose “first principle and foundation” for *The Spiritual Exercises* includes the following instruction:

Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul.

...[W]e must make ourselves indifferent to all created things, as far as we are allowed free choice and are not under any prohibition. Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonour, a long life to a short life. The same holds for all other things.

Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created. (Puhl 2000, 12)

Ignatius’ principle of “holy indifference” helps in the process of communal discernment to determine whether a particular direction is – apart from all the things that one must be indifferent to – conducive to serving God. Using missional language, we might say that a decision would need to be aligned with our best understanding of God’s missional intent – apart from all the things that might skew the decision towards our own interest – in order for it to be judged as a good decision.

Wolff suggests in line with Ignatian spirituality that a decision that is about to be made can be tested by the feelings that arise from it. He cites the example of the decision-making practice of Ignatius and his early companions, who would come together to come to preliminary consensus and then go apart for one week to pray around that preliminary conclusion in the positive and then in the negative. In other words, they would seek to gain a sense of their feelings in regard to the decision if it were made as suggested, and then contrast that with their feelings if the decision were not made as suggested. Their yardstick for judging their feelings went beyond the feelings themselves to discernment of whether one was in a state of “consolation,” which carries with it a sense of peace and movement toward God, or “desolation,” which brings a sense of distress and movement away from God (Wolff 2003, 79).

Discernment in the Quaker Tradition

As they do in the Jesuit context, discernment practices in the Quaker tradition, established by George Fox in England during the 17th century, also demonstrate the interweaving dynamic. Here the emphasis is very much on the impact of communal discernment on decision-making. In the contemporary “Guidelines for Clearness Committees” offered by Friends General Conference, the small group, which is called a “clearness committee” and is facilitated by a “clerk,” helps an individual to come to a personal decision; the principles are similar, the writer of the guidelines suggests, to those that apply when communal decisions need to be made (Friends General Conference 2008, 1).

Barton refers frequently to the practice of Quaker communities when outlining her proposed process for communal discernment; for instance, she proposes the appointment of a “discernmentarian (someone who guides the discernment process, much as a parliamentarian guides the process of majority rule), a clerk or convener (as such as role is defined in Quaker circles), or a sage” (Barton 2008, 199). When describing the process of coming to consensus to end the process of communal discernment, Barton refers again to the “Quaker Friends tradition” in reference to the view that “what is more important than the decision itself is the quality of life together and a sense that they have found the decision that is best for the group” (206).

Interestingly, as will be evident below, a third reference made by Barton to the Quaker tradition resonates strongly with the Jesuit tradition as well. While the citation to follow goes beyond the Quaker tradition as such to a contemporary exercise relevant to all Christian groups, it is worthwhile to quote this reference in its full context, given its instructive merit for the practice of communal discernment in general. In relation to “selecting an option that seems consistent with what God is doing among you” (204), Barton writes,

The Quakers, who are known for their discernment practices, would encourage folks to “place each path near the heart” and see which one brings consolation or desolation. On which option does the Spirit of God seem to rest? What is the fruit of each option? Several other questions that can be helpful in weighing the alternatives: Is there a Scripture that God brings to mind that is pertinent to the issue we are facing? What is the thing that God is making natural and easy? What brings a sense of lightness and peace even in the midst of challenge? Is there an option that enables us to do something before we do everything? (205)

What the Quaker exemplar demonstrates is a strong sense of God's leading presence in the group. This desire to stand in the light of God is evident in the expectation that God is near, as expressed in the exhortation to "pay attention to where God seems to be breaking through, as manifested in love, joy, compassion. Affirm the presence of God" (Friends General Conference 2008, 2).

As noted in the clearness committee guidelines, this Quaker practice of communal discernment took on new urgency in the 1960s when young men in the United States were facing the military draft. "This was not group discernment, as in normal Quaker business practice, but group support for individual discernment" (1). While the focus here is on what we could also call group spiritual direction, the reference to "Quaker business practice" suggests that the clearness committee approach has relevance to communal decision-making as well.

Small Groups in the Wesleyan Tradition

The insistence by John Wesley on the importance of "social holiness" gave him impetus to gather people into small groups or "bands," whose main purpose was to provide a safe context for people to confess the sin they were caught up in and to experience a sense of deliverance from the guilt of that sin (Shepherd 2010, 96). Mark Maddix points out that Wesley's idea that there is "no personal holiness without social holiness" extends to "class meetings" as well as to bands (Maddix 2009, 1). In both cases, Wesley's typical "Holy Club Questions" for small-group soul-searching include, among the twenty-two listed

in Maddix' article, one that speaks to the incarnational principle examined in Chapter Two, namely, "Did the Bible live in me today?" (2).

The questions listed by Maddix suggest that the focus of class meetings and bands in the Wesleyan tradition is primarily on the spiritual health of the individual who is disclosing an area of difficulty in their lives in the group setting. Such groups are more akin to those that engage in the kind of "group spiritual direction" described by Dougherty (1995) and Anne Grizzle (2007), who outline ways to engage in spiritual direction in the company of peers. However, the emphasis on mutuality in community and on the importance of a living sense of Scripture in everyday life underscore the inclusive and incarnational principles at work in communal discernment.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Seminary at Finkenwalde

Although not a contemporary of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jonathan Edwards would have agreed with Bonhoeffer that a reliance on Scripture in the practice of communal discernment is essential. "Because of man's depravity," wrote Edwards, "...the mind is fallen, crippled by sin. Therefore, man needs more than good intentions. He needs the power and presence of the Holy Spirit to reveal God's Word to his mind and to influence his affections" (as quoted in Houston 1984, xvii). It is this reliance on the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in relation to God's Word that characterizes the communal discernment practiced at Finkenwalde, Germany, where Dietrich Bonhoeffer led a community of seminarians under extremely trying circumstances during the Second World War.

Bonhoeffer's personal practice of daily Scripture was, according to Eric Metaxas (2010), a significant factor in shaping the way he viewed his circumstances and came to make decisions. Bonhoeffer is recorded as linking Scripture to a loving relationship with Jesus when, in conversation with his students, he "told them that they should not forget that 'every word of Holy Scripture was a quite personal message of God's love for us.' Bonhoeffer then 'asked us whether we loved Jesus'" (Metaxas 2010, 129).

This sense of Bonhoeffer's insistence on weaving meditation on Scripture into everyday life – a practice he insisted on with his students at Finkenwalde (Metaxas 2010, 269) – is illustrated clearly in the following excerpt from a letter to Rüdiger Schleicher, his brother-in-law, whom Metaxas describes "as liberal theologically as Bonhoeffer was conservative" (Metaxas 2010, 136):

First of all I will confess quite simply – I believe that the Bible alone is the answer to all our questions, and that we need only to ask repeatedly and a little humbly, in order to receive this answer. One cannot simply *read* the Bible, like other books. One must be prepared really to enquire of it. Only thus will it reveal itself...That is because in the Bible God speaks to us. ...Of course it is also possible to read the Bible like any other book, that is to say from the point of view of textual criticism, etc.; there is nothing to be said against that. Only that that is not the method which will reveal to us the heart of the Bible...Only if we will venture to enter into the words of the Bible, as though in them this God were speaking to us who loves us and does not will to leave us alone with our questions, only so shall we learn to rejoice in the Bible.... (Bonhoeffer's emphasis, 136).

It was out of this type of what could be called a Scripture-focused listening prayer discipline that Bonhoeffer taught his students to meditate on Scripture and "deal with the verse as though it was God's word to them personally" (Metaxas 2010, 269). In a letter to Karl Barth, in which he defended

himself against the charge of misguided monasticism, Bonhoeffer wrote that “both theological work and real pastoral fellowship can only grow in a life which is governed by gathering round the Word morning and evening and by fixed times of prayer” (271).

Such an orientation to communal life, where students were encouraged to enter into Scripture-focused listening prayer as a means of discerning God’s presence in everyday life, was closely linked to Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Christian discipleship. Being near to Jesus in the Word is essential, he writes in the opening lines of *Discipleship*, because it positions us in such a way that we can understand what Jesus wants to say to us. “In times of church renewal,” states Bonhoeffer,

holy scripture naturally becomes richer in content for us...What does [Jesus] want from us today? How does he help us to be faithful Christians today? It is not ultimately important to us what this or that church leader wants. Rather, we want to know what Jesus wants (Bonhoeffer 2001, 37).

For the group of ordinands gathered at Finkenwalde, nearness to the words of Scripture was critical to responding to the kinds of questions – we could call them “missional” questions – that arose out of, in this case, the struggle of the church in Germany to respond faithfully to challenges imposed by the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer’s *Prayerbook of the Bible* (1996) was thus an immensely valuable gift for them; it was intended by Bonhoeffer to help them “learn to speak to God because God has spoken and speaks to us.” Furthermore, he writes,

In the language of the Father in heaven God’s children learn to speak with God. Repeating God’s own words, we begin to pray to God. We ought to speak to God, and God wishes to hear us, not in the false and confused

language of our heart but in the clear and pure language that God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ (Bonhoeffer 1996, 108).

Discernment of the sort practiced at Finkenwalde was not specifically tied to communal decision-making; Metaxas suggests that while Bonhoeffer effected servant leadership he nonetheless “would not allow his ordinands to get the impression that they were his equals” (269). Nonetheless, the emphasis on bringing prayer into everyday life, which demonstrates the interweaving principle, and on acknowledging the presence of Jesus especially in relation to Scripture, which demonstrates the incarnational principle, are elements of community life at Finkenwalde that demonstrate well the critical importance of discernment, in the context of true Christian comradeship, for true discipleship.

Summary

Taken together, the following observations emerge from the precedent literature and exemplars examined in this chapter:

1. Reflection-based conversation is an essential element in organizational planning, especially in times of change and transition.
2. In a Christian environment, such reflection can be facilitated through an emphasis on Scripture-focused listening prayer as practiced in community.
3. Leaders who are committed to listening for and following God’s leadership in determining missional direction will do well to

nurture a learning community environment within which an interweaving, inclusive and incarnational approach to organizational planning will flourish.

4. Precedent exemplars in Christian church history demonstrate the value of developing discernment practices in community.

These observations suggest a basic principled approach to organizational planning in a Christian learning community: to put it simply, Scripture-focused listening prayer can be interwoven with organizational planning to maximize its usefulness for navigating change and transition.

Testing this approach in three different settings – a Christian organization, higher education institution and congregation – will help advance our understanding of how leaders can adopt prayer and planning practices that demonstrate a commitment to follow God’s missional intentions for a church or organization. In such a way, organizational planning may result in a recognition of God’s presence that will provide clarity for missional direction-setting, unity among group-members around a shared sense of purpose and assurance that God is in the midst of the direction-setting effort, leading and guiding each step of the way.

CHAPTER FOUR

PROJECT AND METHODOLOGY

The effort to explore the transferability potential of the practice of communal discernment as developed by the staff of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) is outlined in Chapter Four by way of a narrative description of the activities related to the project and an explanation of the methodology and methods that shaped the rationale for those activities. This chapter, which also includes a look at ethical considerations related to the project, sets the stage for analysis of the project outcomes, which occurs in Chapter Five.

Project Narrative

The case study that is foundational to this project relates to the work I did with the staff of the EFC, which entered into a formal process of communal discernment in 2007 and then again in 2009. It is out of my background as an EFC staff member and facilitator of this process that the practice was field-tested, through my DMin project, in other settings.

In our experience with the practice of communal discernment, we learned as EFC staff that prayer could be brought into organizational planning in ways that helped us gain a greater understanding of God's leadership in our organization. We believed that it was possible to include all of the EFC staff (32 people at that time) in a listening process that included both prayer and reflective conversation practices, and we also believed that, through our organizational

planning process, it was possible to gain a sense of following God's lead into places of missional intent and activity where we might not otherwise have gone.

It was in the context of my experience in developing a practice of communal discernment with the EFC staff that I determined to explore the effectiveness of the practice in other settings. To this end, I field-tested practices of communal discernment in three different locations, each of which incorporated a different organizational purpose, structure and culture. The test-sites included a leadership development organization, a Christian higher education institution and a medium-sized congregation.

While the sites differ in mission, structure and culture, all three share missional and contextual elements. The mission of the three groups is to impact the world with God's good news from a broadly evangelical perspective, through the people with whom they directly engage. The three groups all minister within the secularized, pluralized and ever-changing environment that characterizes much of Canadian society. Thus, all three groups are challenged with the work of discerning God's best for the future of their communities and the mission they are engaged in.

As the set of narratives pertinent to each of the test-sites demonstrates, each group had its own unique purpose for utilizing practices of communal discernment and its own unique process in doing so. The following narrative summary highlights both the differences and the commonalities between the three sites. Chapter Five discusses and analyzes the research findings in more detail.

Test-site A: Leadership Development Organization

In the case of the first test-site, the presenting organizational planning need was for an updated strategic plan. The founders of the organization were transitioning to new roles either within or beyond the organization, and those coming into leadership asked that the three-year-old plan be reviewed and revised as needed. As a board member of the organization, my role in facilitating the interweaving of Scripture-focused listening prayer into the planning process cast me as a participant-observer in terms of my research stance.

In November, 2010 staff and board members agreed to adopt a planning approach that would include Scripture-focused listening prayer. We also agreed that a person from outside the organization would facilitate the discussion around our contextual and organizational challenges, while I would facilitate the Scripture-focused listening prayer. A process steering committee was struck comprising the board chairperson, the staff team leader, the outside facilitator and myself.

The group that originally embarked on what we came to call the communal discernment “journey” comprised six staff members and five board members. Due to various circumstances, one staff member and one board member withdrew from the process; we ended the journey with a group of nine people in all.

The organizational planning process was originally intended to be undertaken in three months – December, January and February. For a number of

reasons, including the need to restore ruptured relationships between staff and board members, the time frame was extended to nine months. We met in person on six occasions, usually over an eight-hour period; our last meeting took place over a two-day period.

As the process unfolded, our plans for facilitation changed to accommodate our understanding of our changing needs. While the outside facilitator helped us identify key challenges in the first two meetings, the organizational solutions that were put forward by her seemed at odds with the communal discernment arising from Scripture-focused listening prayer. One of the staff members facilitated the third meeting in February, while a second outside facilitator helped with the fourth meeting in June – a critical moment for reconciliation and moving ahead together as staff and board. From this point onward, I facilitated the process as whole, and was thus able to bring a communal discernment process into our organizational planning approach in a more direct way.

During the first part of our communal discernment journey (December to February), we engaged in listening prayer that focused on three different Scripture passages in relation to each of the three meetings that took place during this time period. The participants were invited to reflect on each of these passages individually, summarize their individual reflections in writing and then post their reflections online (some did so anonymously). Members of the organization's prayer support group were invited to do the same.

These posted reflections were collated and distributed by me before the December, January and February meetings. We started each of the meetings during this period with a time of *lectio divina* reflection and prayer in relation to the passage that was relevant to that meeting (see Appendix A for an outline of the approach we used). The facilitator of the June meeting introduced a fourth passage, which – together with the earlier passages – became a key reference point for the rest of the journey. Thus, we absorbed the significance of all four passages into our understanding of who God was calling us to be and what God was calling us to do.

A process detail worth mentioning in relation to the prayer strand of the Communal Discernment practice is that of choosing the focus Scripture passage. As prayer facilitator, I wanted to remain as neutral as possible, so I invited members of the board and team to offer suggested passages out of their personal encounters with Scripture, whether through their daily readings, listening to Sunday sermons or any other means. Our experience was that Scripture passages rose quite naturally to the attention of group members, without resort to intentional proof-texting or some other means of biased selection.

Those who facilitated the discussion that accompanied the other strands of the process used a reflection-based approach, aligning loosely with Appreciative Inquiry processes, either implicitly or explicitly. For example, the outside facilitator conducted one-on-one interviews with the group participants before the December session, and spent considerable time at the meeting itself on the questions, “What’s working well? What’s not working well?”

The adoption of a strategic plan at the September 2011 meeting coincided with our sense that this particular leg of the communal discernment journey had ended. However, we included an element in the strategic plan that committed us to practicing communal discernment whenever we were in a direction-seeking situation in future.

Test-site B: Higher Education Institution

At the second test-site, an organizational review process was conducted from mid-January to early March 2011, in relation to the pending retirement of staff persons in key positions. A previous positive experience with communal approaches to what they called “discernment prayer” in the past meant that institutional leaders were open to engaging in a similar process once again.

The previous discernment process was facilitated by a staff person, who took some of his cues from what I was learning in my context with the EFC staff. When approaching him and the president of the institution about the possibility of undertaking research at their site in a more formal way, it was decided among the three of us that my role would be to coach the staff person who once again acted as the prayer facilitator. Thus my research stance at Test-site B was as an external observer.

One reason why I was not offered the overall facilitating role was a concern raised by the leadership regarding the possibility that my research activity could change the course of the process being observed. Thus the danger of my research skewing the results of the organizational planning process was

minimized. For similar reasons, I did not connect with the outside consultant who facilitated the needs assessment research until after his work had been completed.

In December 2011, the president of the institution formally introduced the upcoming organizational review to the faculty and staff by way of a written communication. This document, which is addressed in terms of research findings in Chapter Five, helped to further ready the participants in the process.

The president of the institution also established a group to act as a sounding board to the outside consultant who was asked to conduct the review, thus helping the consultant to process what he was learning through his review and what he was concluding as a result. This group included the prayer facilitator, who led the sounding group in discernment prayer on three occasions in January and February, and did the same for a larger faculty/staff group in January and again in February.

The prayer facilitator also led a discernment prayer session with the senior executive team at the end of February and then with the board when it met in early March to receive the report on the organizational review. (It should be noted that, following his experience in facilitating the first round of institutional discernment prayer, the prayer facilitator was commonly asked to lead the board in discernment prayer at the beginning of board meetings.) The prayer facilitator passed on the outcomes of the various discernment prayer sessions to the outside consultant at various times between the start and end of the planning period.

The focus Scripture passages were chosen by the prayer facilitator; the process that he used for discernment prayer was related to, though slightly different from, a *lectio divina* approach (see Appendix B).

Test-site C: Congregation

The third test-site, where communal discernment was undertaken by the five-person staff of a medium-sized congregation, provided an occasion for testing a variation of the practice that was much shorter in duration. The senior pastor and I determined the best application of a communal discernment practice in the context of this congregation by way of a series of phone and email conversations starting in December 2010. We determined that a good opportunity to introduce the practice to the congregation's staff would be at the staff retreat planned for April 2011, an occasion when they would be gathered together to work on developing their annual plans and budgets.

We also developed together an outline for the retreat day, and determined that my role would be to facilitate both strands of the communal discernment practice, namely, the Scripture-focused listening prayer and the reflection-based discussion around current reality and next steps.

Five staff-members came together for the retreat, and engaged with me in a communal discernment process that took us six-and-a-half hours to complete. The day took shape as follows (see also Appendix C):

1. The participants were led in a *lectio divina* prayer time that was similar to that described above in relation to the prayer sessions conducted

with the leadership development organization. After the closing prayer, we identified major themes emerging from the listening prayer exercise.

2. We reviewed the stated mission-focused purpose of the congregation, as well as the biblical/theological foundations for it.
3. We talked about the context for carrying out the congregation's missional purpose, specifically with a view to identifying changes since it had first been articulated.
4. We then discussed the impact of these changes on the current strategic priorities for the staff.
5. Finally, we identified next steps for the staff to take into their upcoming budgeting session.

My part in the retreat ended at this point, while the staff-members stayed in the retreat location in order to complete their annual plans.

Research Methodology

The research project undertaken at the three test-site locations was shaped by factors related to methodology – the research approach and the methods used to document and analyze the research. The research methodology used in this research project is characterized in the first place by its qualitative, rather than quantitative, nature; no attempt was made to gather randomized data samples in numeric terms or to undertake statistical analysis.

Qualitative, Grounded Theory Approach

More specifically, I undertook a “grounded theory approach” (Bell 2005) to this research project. The grounded theory approach can be adopted where a specific theory is not yet developed about the issue at hand. In my case, I had previous experience, as well a preliminary review of pertinent literature, to guide my research in the three test-sites, but I had not yet developed a full-fledged theoretical approach to the practice that I was field-testing, and thus did not start off with a set of clearly defined hypotheses that I wanted to test.

Instead, I sought to develop a deepened understanding of communal discernment based on my examination and analysis of the data I collected in the three test-sites. In conducting the analysis, I adopted an iterative process, that is, “a cyclical process in which theoretical insights emerge or are discovered in the data, those insights are then tested to see how they can make sense of other parts of the data, which in turn produce their own theoretical insights, which are then tested again against the data, and so on” (Hayes 2000 in Bell 2005, 19). In this sense, the grounded theory approach is similar to action research (Bell 2005), which also goes through an iterative process.

My stance as researcher differed in all three test-site locations. In Test-site A, I was an internal participant-observer. As an offsite coach to the prayer facilitator there, I was an external observer, and not a participant, in Test-site B. In Test-site C, I acted as an external participant-observer in Test-site C. All three research stances engendered both advantages and disadvantages.

The advantage to being an internal participant-observer was that I was able to conduct the research project with a fuller understanding of the context and issues at play; the challenge was to clearly distinguish between my roles as facilitator and researcher. My role as external observer or external participant-observer in the other two test-sites enabled me to more clearly distinguish the processes from the personalities of those people engaged in them. The disadvantage in these cases was that I was not able to follow-through on the processes so as to clearly observe their long-term effects.

Given the nature of communal discernment practices, particularly in affective and spiritual terms, the qualitative approach to the research design was well suited to understanding the lived experiences of those engaged in such practices. The reflective interviewing method associated with qualitative research elicited richly textured narratives, which allowed for various layers of interpretation. This was especially appropriate in a research situation that was highly inductive, reflexive, meaning-focused and contextualized.

Since the goal of the research project was not to generalize findings to a larger population but rather to provide sufficient information for readers to judge the potential for application to their own situations, the qualitative research design afforded the kind of description of the context and participants that would be of potential benefit to them.

As will be noted below, efforts were made to ground the research findings in the collected data, to document layers of analysis and to substantiate patterns

and themes with supporting quotations. Also, interpretations of the data were subjected to the scrutiny of the thesis advisor at various points along the way.

Methods Related to Data Collection and Analysis

A sample of three test-sites was chosen for this research project in order to examine, illuminate and probe the experience of those engaged in different, yet similar practices of communal discernment. Since the purpose of the research project was to demonstrate the transferability of principles from one site to another – and potentially to the situations of readers of this thesis as well – the three sites were chosen to describe the experience of communal discernment practices in three different, yet typical, contexts for Christian missional activity.

The methods used for collecting data included:

1. The rigorous recording of research narratives and observations at various points along the way.
2. Field notes that included records of in-person or telephone interviews, as well as email conversations related to the project.
3. The use of a journal to record reflections on the research project that often arose from my personal Scripture-reading and/or listening prayer.
4. The collection of data from online surveys.
5. Face-to-face interviews with participants in the three test-site locations. These interviews, recorded through my simultaneous note-taking activity, were conducted with individuals at Test-site A. At

Test-site B, the interviews were with the prayer facilitator individually, with a group of eight faculty and staff persons and with a group of two persons (the president and the prayer facilitator together). The interviews at Test-site C were conducted with the senior pastor individually and with the staff team as a whole on the day of the planning retreat.

Across the three sites, data was collected from a total of nine online questionnaires, three group interviews, three individual interviews and a series of informal interviews and email conversations conducted with the leaders at the three test-sites. The interview guide (Appendix D) used in all three test-sites was designed to engender narratives that would, without posing leading questions, touch on the themes identified in the literature review.

Once the data had been collected into a set of typewritten pages, I undertook systematic analysis by a) reading it through several times; b) identifying key words related to each paragraph or data section; c) condensing the key words into categories; and d) identifying recurrent themes in the data. These themes were then placed into overarching categories presented by the theological rationale that I developed in conjunction with the research undertaken at the test-sites.

Ethical Considerations

The research project underwent two formal ethical reviews. The first was undertaken in April 2009 when the project-thesis proposal was reviewed by the

project-thesis supervisor and a peer-review group. The second was undertaken by the ethics review committee of the higher education institution test-site; in this case as it related specifically to the research relevant to that institution.

This research project conforms to the “Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.” More specifically, the research was undertaken in such a way as to meet the Council’s requirements regarding the seeking of informed consent, maintaining security of the data collected and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

Informed consent of the participants was sought through approvals obtained by members of the groups at the three test-sites. In the case of the first test-site, this approval came about at a meeting where all the participants agreed that communal discernment should be interwoven into the organizational planning process. In the case of the second test-site, approval of my coaching relationship with the prayer facilitator was given by the president of the institution; consent for the onsite interviews that I undertook at the end of the institution’s organizational review period was obtained from each individual who responded positively to my request for an interview. At Test-site C, consent was obtained from the senior pastor.

All of the data collected by me throughout the research period has been, and will continue to be, stored in a secure cabinet in my personal home office. This step, in addition to my efforts to conceal the identity of the three test-sites by not naming the organizations or the individuals associated with them, constitutes the means whereby anonymity and confidentiality was ensured. All of the

participants at all three test-sites were assured that I would keep the data secure, and would maintain anonymity and confidentiality of their responses to personal interviews or questionnaires.

Furthermore, the research participants were not compensated for their participation, nor were there known or anticipated risks associated with their participation. They knowingly viewed their participation in the research project as a contribution to fuller understanding of bringing prayer into organizational planning processes, and saw benefit accruing from the project for Christian churches and organizations that are seeking to bridge the perceived divide between “spiritual” and “worldly” organizational practices.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The conceptual framework for analyzing the findings and outcomes of the research project is informed by the theological rationale developed in Chapter Two of this thesis. As noted in Chapter One, this theological framework was arrived at after, not before, the research data had been collected, and thus demonstrates the ongoing interaction between my research analysis and the theological reasoning that I continued to engage in.

In line with the theological rationale described in Chapter Two, the data collected from the three test-sites illuminates the interweaving, inclusive and incarnational principles at play in the process of communal discernment as practiced in those locations. It also suggests that practices of communal discernment, while they may differ from one site to the next, have the potential to effectively bridge the sacred/secular divide that can make it difficult for people in Christian churches and organizations to develop organizational plans that demonstrate their emergence from truly Spirit-led communities.

Interweaving Principle

The interweaving principle is demonstrated in the research data in relation to: a) the purposes behind the adoption of practices of communal discernment in the three test-sites; b) the processes through which communal discernment was carried out; and c) the overall impact of communal discernment on organizational planning in terms of a heightened sense of missional direction.

Purpose

The purposes in adopting a communal discernment approach to organizational planning differed in terms of application from one site to the other, but they coalesced in substantial ways as well.

In the case of Test-site A (the leadership development organization), the impetus for a communal discernment journey was the need for a strategic plan that would enable the leaders to execute the mission of the organization into the future. As significant changes in the composition of the leadership team took place, the purpose of the communal discernment practice was broadened to include a focus on the structural adjustments that would be required to carry out a strategic plan.

In regard to Test-site B (the Christian higher education institution), the purpose of entering into a time of discernment prayer was to embed reflection on upcoming transitions in senior leadership positions in prayer.

At Test-site C (the medium-sized congregation), the staff incorporated communal discernment into a retreat that was designed to provide opportunity to craft their individual annual plans in relation to the overarching strategic plan that had been developed previously by the congregation's board.

Whether the immediate purpose in practising communal discernment was in relation to strategic planning, succession planning or developing an annual plan, the common motivation in all three test-site locations was to bring prayer into the planning process in an intentional manner.

Process

With respect to process, the research data indicates that each test-site location adopted its own unique approach to executing practices of communal discernment. While all three locations incorporated the two definitive elements of Scripture-focused listening prayer and reflection-based approaches to planning, variations in process details are apparent in the ways in which communal discernment was practiced.

For example, the time frames were different in all three, as were the means by which the process was facilitated. The process in Test-site A took just over nine months to complete, three months in Test-site B and only one day in Test-site C. My role as researcher differed in each location as well: I was a co-facilitator and then single facilitator of the process in Test-site A; coach to the prayer facilitator at Test-site B; and single outside facilitator in Test-site C.

Nevertheless, because all sites had Scripture-focused listening prayer and reflection-oriented approaches to planning in common, the three test-sites can be evaluated in relation to the interweaving principle: how did they go about interweaving listening prayer and organizational planning in terms of process? For the purposes of this research project, the experiences of the three test-sites in relation to the process of interweaving prayer and planning are very instructive about the usefulness of adopting practices of communal discernment as an approach to organizational planning.

At Test-site A, the difficulties with interweaving prayer and planning were

most pronounced when two different people facilitated the two processes: myself as author-researcher leading the prayer element and an outside facilitator leading the strategic conversation element. Although the outside facilitator used a reflection-based approach to organizational planning, and was highly appreciative of what she called the “special positive attitude of openness and listening” (FN-A, December 19, 2011)³ in the group, it was clear after six weeks into the planning period that her understanding of what the group needed to focus on did not align with what the participants were articulating as outcomes of the prayer process.

My field notes record my concern following the first meeting that we had two parallel processes underway, and needed to find ways to interweave them more effectively (FN-A, December 1, 2010). This concern was heightened during the second meeting when I observed that the other facilitator was not taking into consideration the outcomes of the reflections on the focus Scripture passage (FN-A, January 10, 2011). In an email to the members of the process steering committee, one of the members expressed frustration that the facilitator seemed to be “dismissing the [prayer outcomes that] we had generated rather than build on them as we moved into her section” (FN-A, January 31, 2011).

Two of the respondents to the questionnaire administered in May 2011 for evaluation purposes also noted a lack of connection between the prayer and planning elements in the process (EQ-A, May 4, 2011; EQ-A, May 7, 2011). One person indicated that the impact of communal discernment in relation to the planning outcome was hampered by this disconnect (but wrote as well that “as

³ The rubric for naming the research data sources throughout this chapter is described on page x.

final decisions have not been made about future plans yet it is difficult to see the connection yet”) (EQ-A, May 7, 2011).

The situation at Test-site B was similar to that of the early stages of Test-site A. Despite the intent to interweave the two processes in meaningful ways, both the prayer facilitator (FN-B, February 23, 2011) and outside consultant (FN-B, May 16, 2011) said that the two did not come together as well as they might have. Indeed, the outside consultant indicated that although he fully supported the effort to “bathe the process in prayer” in general terms, he had not fully understood the intent behind “discernment prayer” in particular, and so “did not take the opportunity to connect the dots” (FN-B, May 16, 2011).

At Test-site C, given the short time frame and the single-facilitator situation, the experience of greatest success at interweaving prayer and planning from a process point of view occurred at the annual planning staff retreat. My reflections on “good linkage” between the *lectio divina* outcomes and the themes for the day (FN-C, April 19, 2011) were underscored in this case by participants’ comments during the debriefing session, which took place at the end of my time with the group. One person, who in so doing demonstrated the group’s experience with *lectio divina* practices in the past, said, “*Lectio* is always good: the Word forms us.” Another said, “*Lectio* set the stage” (FN-C, April 19, 2011).

Impact: Missional Direction

The research data suggests that, despite the variances in interweaving prayer and planning from a process perspective, the value of communal

discernment resides primarily in its impact on the participants in the planning process. Here the examination of the interweaving principle takes on a particular angle. The question to be asked in relation to its general impact is, Did practices of communal discernment help to bring together the sometimes disparate elements of the “spiritual” life of the organization/congregation and the so-called “worldly” operations of that same organization/congregation? More particularly, did practices of communal discernment heighten understanding of missional direction or did it not?

These questions lie at the heart of the premise that the interweaving of prayer and planning can heighten a community’s understanding of its missional direction in the sense of introducing a greater understanding of the *missio Dei*, or God’s missional agenda, as it relates to that community.

The data collected at the three test-sites indeed indicate a heightened sense of awareness of God’s mission. While specific “missional” language was used at Test-site C only, the references to “God’s agenda,” “God’s timetable” or “the bigger story” at Test-sites A and B indicate a clear recognition of the same principle that God’s overarching mission leads and frames the mission of every Christian endeavour.

In Test-site A, five of the seven respondents to the questionnaire indicated that the communal discernment practice helped them, in the words of one respondent, to “realize that we are on God’s timetable and not a human deadline to accomplish a major transition” (May 4, 2011), and, in the words of another, it

“made the planning process more focused on the direction and future God would have for [us]” (May 17, 2011). Similarly, a third respondent indicated,

...I do believe that the discernment process has particularly guided us in...the realization that the timing of the process and the outcomes/decisions has to be God-lead [sic] and not human-directed or mandated. (May 25, 2011b)

Two further examples appear in the evaluation questionnaires where one respondent wrote, “The prayer process has put the mandate in God’s hands” (May 4, 2011), and another said, “I think people have their own agendas and it is important to see God working in and through each one individually. However, there comes a point that we have to ‘let go and let God’ work” (May 25, 2011a).

Similar expressions of connection to God’s work were offered at Test-site B. A questionnaire respondent comment from a participant in the communal discernment practice at Test-site B reflects this effect when stating, “Of the many times of prayer at [our institution], the communal discernment prayer...was a highlight of meaningful spiritual engagement and connection of faith to tangible work outcomes” (EQ-B, April 19, 2011).

Also, one of the participants in the group interview said,

The process helped to connect the situation with the sense of purpose as articulated in God’s story. The specific events at [the institution] weren’t the only thing that came into focus; it was also the bigger picture that came into play. (March 30, 2011)

As she went on to say, the bigger picture that the communal discernment process brought into play included reflection on the question, “how had God worked in the past?” as well as where the institution was heading in the future (March 30, 2011).

At Test-site C, one participant said that the Communal discernment practice affirmed that “God has been working through our story all along.” In this sense, it “enabled engagement in the process that God is working in us” (FN-C, April 19, 2011). Furthermore, one respondent indicated that the practice of communal discernment at the planning retreat brought “greater clarity and conviction re: current themes / direction” (EQ-C, May 9, 2011).

Summary of Findings Related to the Interweaving Principle

The research data associated with practices of communal discernment at the three test-sites indicates first of all, in relation to purpose, that the leaders in all three locations were expecting that the practice would help to bring together prayer and planning in a meaningful way. Secondly, while difficulties were experienced in two of the locations at different times from a process perspective, the intent to interweave prayer and planning was indeed executed through different means of facilitation. Finally, all three test-sites indicated a strong impact in terms of missional direction: participants in the communal discernment practice were able to articulate their sense that they felt more connected with God’s mission for the organization than they had previously.

Inclusive Principle

The inclusive principle – pulling the voices of community members into organizational planning – was a recurrent feature of practices of communal discernment at all three test-sites. All three drew on a larger body than they might

have in a traditional, hierarchical leadership structure. Moreover, four aspects arising from the research data deserve attention at this point, including: a) the levels of trust present as groups engaged in the practice; b) the relationship between the leader and the other members in the community; c) the changes in organizational culture experienced by communities that engaged in the practice; and d) the impact of the inclusive principle as it relates to a heightened sense of unity.

Levels of Trust

From the perspective of the inclusive principle, a major contributor to communal discernment effectiveness is the “trust quotient” present in the community (Covey, 2006). This aspect helped to either heighten or decrease the ability of people to listen to one another and thus benefit from communal reflection on God’s words in relation to organizational planning.

Indications of a low level of trust in the case of Test-site A, at least in the early stages of the process, are exemplified in two responses to the evaluation questionnaire. One respondent indicated an overall negative experience with the communal discernment practice. The lack of positive response may be attributed to this person’s lack of confidence in the group, given the statement that in other circumstances, “I believe in communal discernment and practicing it in Christian groups where you know and trust the group...” (EQ-A, May 26, 2011). A second respondent noted, “There has to be a great deal of trust built up amongst community members and an acknowledgement of how each others giftedness is

important to the whole picture. It is important that every team member is valued” (EQ-A, May 25, 2011a).

One particular element in the process related to communal discernment that had the potential to evoke suspicion, if not mistrust, was how the focus Scripture passage in listening prayer was chosen. When this issue was raised in one of the sessions at Test-site A, it was helpful for me to say specifically that the passage had been suggested by another group-member. My response may or may not have alleviated the concern that the focus passage was chosen by me as facilitator with a particular outcome in mind.

During a time of major staffing transitions, some of which resulted in misunderstandings especially between board and staff members, the low level of trust in Test-site A inhibited the practice of communal discernment. Fortunately, healed relationships at later stages of the process helped to restore trust and confidence in both the leadership and the outcomes of the communal discernment practice.

While the data from Test-site A suggests what can result from a low level of trust among community-members, the data from Test-site B illustrates the other side of the coin. In a conversation with the prayer facilitator, reference was made to the fact that “the community as a whole has a great sense of trust in the process – a rock-bottom issue in times of change” (FN-B, February 2, 2011). For example, a respondent to the questionnaire referred to trust in the process, as well as “a deepened sense of collegiality and trust among the mid-level managers...and with the President” (EQ-B, April 19, 2011). Another conversation with the prayer

facilitator underscored the latter point; he said that the president had taken “great pains to create an atmosphere of trust” (FN-B, March 4, 2011).

Role of the Leader

As may be surmised in relation to the inclusive principle, the role of the leader is critical in ensuring positive outcomes from practices of communal discernment. This was particularly evident in Test-site B, where participants in the group interview referred positively to the leadership of the prayer facilitator when they commented on their high comfort level with his facilitation of a prayer process that was unfamiliar to some, though not all (March 30, 2011).

One person in particular noted the courage required of leaders who engage in a communal discernment practice, stating that, “Christian leaders need to be very open and vulnerable to a process like this,” and continuing to say,

If a leader is open to allowing the community to come together to hear what God is saying, it leaves them open to risk. I commend [the institution] for doing it because many won't do it...It speaks highly of the leadership here – requires a willingness to be vulnerable and humble (March 30, 2011).

The president of the institution noted during the interview I conducted with him and the prayer facilitator that he had been struck in a different setting by the image of David dancing before the Lord. What stuck with him was the image of the leader “being one who says we’re called to follow the Lord and seek his will.” Another statement during the interview clearly illustrates that the president took seriously this role of “first to follow,” as understood in Christian discipleship terms. He said,

The leader doesn't need to have all the answers but needs to know where we should all go; he or she needs to help the whole community to see that we need to seek God's will, and be the first to admit that that's what we need. The assessment of where we're at and how the Lord is leading can come from all parts of the body – it's very communal. The Lord working through the body is part of what strikes me about this process – different people genuinely speaking God's will. To hear the counsel of all people around has helped me for sure (March 30, 2011).

The president also noted a “levelling effect” that occurred in conversations beginning with discernment prayer, when “the hierarchies could be set aside.” A participant in the communal discernment practice at Test-site A made a similar observation:

The implications for leadership in Christian communities are huge in that...communal prayer around specific scripture passages puts everyone on a level playing field. It diminishes the power differential between executives and those on the front lines, and can increase the effectiveness of the planning process because you are gathering in a greater range of wisdom and experience (EQ-A, May 25, 2011b).

The implication was echoed by one of the Communal discernment practice participants at Test-site B:

Leaders need to stop, read scripture, listen to God, listen to each other (especially if team unity is a goal) to truly discern what God wants for an organization. Hearing each other reflect on what God is telling us allows us to hear each other differently...and celebrate that difference (EQ-B, April 19, 2011)

Along similar lines, one member of the process steering committee at Test-site A suggested that the organization's leadership needed to be more “web-based” than hierarchical, and wondered whether such a structure would lend itself better to practices of communal discernment (Field Notes, February 2, 2011).

The issue of the leader's role in communal discernment was also noted at Test-site C. One statement made during conversations with the senior pastor prior

to the planning retreat relates very explicitly to the role of the leader(s) in a Christian church or organization that embarks on a practice of communal discernment: “Leaders should give primary attention to cultivating fertile environments in which the people of God can *together* discern what the Spirit is up to” (FN-C, December 22, 2010).

Changes in Organizational Culture

The research data indicates that the introduction of the practice of communal discernment can generate changes in organizational culture. Here the inclusive principle, as illustrated in the context of the role of the leader discussed above, reveals itself in terms of opening up decision-making processes to get broader input from members of the community.

For example, the prayer facilitator in Test-site B called the culture in the discernment prayer sessions a microcosm of the institutional culture macrocosm: “As the culture in the room changed,” he said, “so [those in the room] believed institutional culture could change” (I-B, March 30, 2011). Ongoing acceptance of the inclusion of more people in decision-making would be possible, he indicated, as “a life of discernment prayer becomes part of the institutional ethos.” The president echoed the prayer facilitator’s observations when he said in the same interview,

What became apparent as we sought out a lot of voices was that the project became less about [the matter at hand] and more about the broader questions about how we continue to develop campus culture and community. These questions were not entirely new, but [they] became foreground rather than background...the whole culture is important and everyone has a role to play in it (March 30, 2011).

The senior pastor at Test-site C likewise anticipated that practices of communal discernment could help to overcome a measure of independence and “silo-thinking” that, to a certain degree and for understandable reasons, characterized the staff culture (FN-C, January 17, 2011). His expectation was that the retreat day would help staff to deepen “personal engagement and shared commitment to the *missio Dei* as it is exemplified at [this church]” (FN-C, April 18, 2011).

At Test-site A, the matter of organizational culture arose in the later stages of engagement in the practice of communal discernment in the context of designing a new structure for the organization. The key concept that shaped the new thinking around organizational structure was that the organization should be an intentional “learning community” (in reference to Peter Senge’s thinking on this subject in *The Fifth Discipline*) and thus embody a readiness to adapt to change in a collaborative environment.

This commitment to a certain kind of organizational culture was contained in the strategic plan document that records assent to a set of “travelling principles,” as they were called, which were drawn from the focus passages that anchored the interweaving of Scripture-focused listening prayer with the organizational planning process. The first of these principles reflects ongoing commitment to practicing forms of communal discernment: “We listen for signals from God before moving ahead in any endeavour, trusting that God will lead us in breaking through any barriers we may encounter (1 Chronicles 14).”

Impact: Unity

Another recurrent theme arising from the data was a heightened sense of unity among community-members. At Test-site A, the effect of the communal discernment practice on building unity was noted in relation to the “assurance that we were all focussing on the passage and hearing similar things” (I-A, March 23, 2011). A questionnaire respondent wrote, “I feel this drew us together as a group” (EQ-A, May 25, 2011a). Similarly, another said, “Communal discernment in communities discourages individuals from going forward with their own ideas but having these ideas affirmed by God through prayer with others in that community [*sic*]” (EQ-A, May 17, 2011). It should be noted, however, that not everyone at Test-site A experienced this sense of heightened unity; one participant wrote in an email, “There is a gap for me, in my experience, of what we were hearing as we prayed and looked at Scripture together, and where we are now in unity and understanding” (FN-A, March 21, 2011).

The prayer facilitator at Test-site B wrote in an email that the discernment prayer practice is “community building, and strengthens a community’s capacity to hear and follow the Lord’s leading” (FN-B, January 24, 2011). While this statement ties into the integrative principle as well, it resonates with the inclusive principle because of the explicit reference to community-building – a concept that was reiterated by the prayer facilitator during my interview with him two months later, when he said, “discernment prayer has the role of bringing a fragmented community into an organic whole” (March 30, 2011).

The observation that people were coming together to form community was exemplified by one of the group interview participants, who referenced the experience of a “sense of community and blessing whatever the outcome was” (March 30, 2011). Another person said in the same interview, “It was helpful to know that we’re dealing with [the upcoming transitions] as a community.”

The heightened sense of unity was an impact that was also noted by a respondent to the evaluation questionnaire at Test-site C, who wrote a few weeks after the planning retreat, “There seems to be a greater sense of 'working from the same page'” (May 9, 2011).

Summary of Findings Related to the Inclusive Principle

The data as it relates to the inclusive principle suggests, first of all, that practices of communal discernment were most effective where levels of trust were high. Secondly, the willingness of the leader to enter into a “level playing field” situation was also critical in ensuring that the practice of communal discernment could be applied effectively. The third aspect to be noted is the potential for change in organizational culture, as recognized in all three locations. Finally, the community-building impact of communal discernment practices was experienced in all three settings.

Incarnational Principle

The incarnational principle – that God is with us at all times and is especially revealed in relationship with Jesus Christ and, through the Holy Spirit,

in Scripture as well – was evidenced in practices of communal discernment in the test-sites as it relates to: a) expressions of a sense of God’s presence in the exercise of the practice; b) recognition of the importance of Scripture in the practice; c) recognition of the importance of listening in the practice; and d) perception of the impact of communal discernment in a heightened sense of assurance in relation to change and transition.

Sense of God’s Presence

The theme of sensing God’s presence is evident in the data collected from all three test-sites. For example, one person at Test-site A suggested that the communal discernment practice “helped us realize that God was present and in our midst as we talked and deliberated” (EQ-A, May 25, 2011a). At Test-site B, the expectation that the practice would help to instill that sense of God’s presence is reflected in the document circulated to faculty and staff on December 22, 2010, where it states, “... embedding such reflection [on matters of institutional direction] in discernment prayer keeps the focus on God’s presence and purpose among us rather than upon ourselves.” At Test-site C, a questionnaire respondent indicated that the time of discerning prayer pointed to “an over-arching theme of yearning for divine presence” (May 9, 2011).

The recurrent theme of God’s presence in many respects lies at the heart of practices of communal discernment: the relationship between us and God, as exercised through Scripture-focused listening prayer, starts first and foremost with the affirmation of faith that God is indeed present in our situations at all times.

Importance of Scripture

The idea that prayer is important in relation to planning was not new to any of the participants in practices of communal discernment at the three test-site locations. What did attract comment, however, was the broad scope of the role that Scripture played in the practice.

For example, when contrasting the practice of communal discernment with other prayer practices, a participant at Test-site A wrote, “What was different in [this] process was that the insights and directions came out of the passages of Scripture...” (EQ-A, May 25, 2011b). This same person noted the power of Scripture “to speak to the process and help confirm/unconfirm our thinking.”

In reflecting on the outcomes of the process he led people through, the prayer facilitator at Test-site B stated that, “everything said comes in reference to the passage...the passage gives focus to what people hear and say” (FN-B, February 2, 2011). Further in the same conversation, he based his appreciation for process on, among other things, the fact that the Scripture focus shapes the outcome of the group’s thinking; the process “evokes different thoughts than [the consultant’s interviews] would because of the reference to Scripture.”

During the debriefing session at Test-site C, one of the participants reflected on the movement of the Holy Spirit in the Scripture passage chosen for *lectio divina*, and suggested that “through the text, the Spirit picks up on things [we were] already thinking about” (FN, April 19, 2011).

This last comment, which is highly illustrative of the incarnational

principle, coincides with an even stronger statement made by a participant in the group interview at Test-site B, who said she had appreciated the process “because of the sense of the Holy Spirit in oneself and how this Spirit speaks to other people from the same passage.” As a result she saw Scripture as “a living document through the Spirit” (March 30, 2011).

Importance of Listening

The incarnational understanding of Scripture as a means of sensing God’s presence with us is tied to the importance of listening as a key component of practices of communal discernment. Two comments taken from the research data illustrate the recurrent theme of the importance of listening.

A questionnaire respondent at Test-site B wrote,

Building prayer intentionally around a scripture passage and allowing it to speak into a situation...to “marinate” the conversation on [sic] the outset, requires a shift of approach to prayer. Rather than prayer being a petition...it was a prayer which required me/us to listen to what God was saying to us. It required me/us (who are too often too busy with doing) to “be still, and know”...and listen...to what God might be saying to us individually, communally, and [to our institution] (April 19, 2011).

Similarly, a questionnaire respondent at Test-site C pointed to need to be focus on listening, when writing,

Significant attention must be given to listening to each other. This requires the suspension of personal passion and convictions to detect what God may be saying through others...It is broad listening that is required...not the kind that values the movers and shakers only – what is God doing among all his people [sic] (May 9, 2011).

Impact: Assurance

The research data also demonstrates a confluence of terms associated with the impact of practices of communal discernment on the affective level. This is not surprising, perhaps, given that it is in relation to “religious affections,” as Jonathan Edwards would put it, that we most clearly sense God’s presence and guidance (Houston 1984).

The word, “confidence,” appears in the data several times in relation to “confidence that God is in us” (I-A, March 30, 2011); “confidence that [the group is] acting within God’s leading” (EQ-A, May 25, 2011b); and “a sense of confidence that God was in control of the process” (EQ-B, April 19, 2011).

The word, “peace,” appears frequently as well. Reference was made to the awareness engendered in the process that “God knows what’s best for [us]...which gives the process a wonderful peace” (EQ-A, May 4, 2011). In test-site B, the prayer facilitator’s description of the process as “peaceful” (FN-B, January 24, 2011) is echoed by one participant in the group interview who spoke of a “sense of peace once [the process] started” (I-B, March 30, 2011), and by another who wrote in similar fashion about confidence that “there was a sense of peace that God was in control of the...process” (EQ-B, April 19, 2011).

The words, “confidence” and “peace,” correlate with the word, “trust,” in terms of the sense of God’s presence in the process. The prayer facilitator at Test-site B noted, “the community as a whole has a great sense of trust in the process – a rock-bottom issue in times of change” (I-B, February 2, 2011).

Directly related to this comment is his assertion that communal discernment acts as a container characterized by the kind of peace described in Philippians 4:13. “Prayer provided a container for the anxiety,” he said. This was crucial because “anxiety left on its own permeates everything, distorts, undermines and multiplies. Prayer gives people breathing room to bypass anxiety and go to other conclusions. It has a slower rhythm and a different dynamic can set in” (I-B, March 4, 2011).

Confidence, peace, trust and a release of anxiety are affective terms that can perhaps be best summed up in the word, “assurance,” which captures well that sense of faith that God is present with us in all of our circumstances.

Summary of the Findings related to the Incarnational Principle

The data illustrates that the incarnational principle plays out in relation to practices of communal discernment in several ways. This principle is recognized wherever participants sensed that God is present in the midst of their organizational planning process, and it is demonstrated in their observations of the role that Scripture and the act of listening played in the process. Finally, its impact was felt especially on the affective level in the sense of assurance that faith in God’s presence gives the participants.

Cross-site Comparison of Research Findings

A comparison of the data related to the three test-sites reveals unique themes in each one, as well as themes held in common. For example, Test-site A

demonstrates a greater emphasis on issues around trust than do the other test-sites. This is closely related to the fact that community relationships were more fragile at the beginning of the process than in the other test-sites. In terms of the data collected from this test-site during the research period, the low trust quotient is most evident in relation to the outcomes of practices of communal discernment, as evaluated mid-way through the process, as well as the way in which Scripture was chosen as the focus for listening prayer.

Challenges to the interweaving principle, in relation to process, appeared in Test-site A and Test-site B. In both cases integration of prayer and planning was hampered by the fact that the outside facilitators, while appreciative of the prayer element, were not fully oriented to the communal discernment process. This clearly was a shortcoming of the research process, not the facilitators themselves.

The long-term impact of communal discernment on organizational culture was discussed most fully in Test-site B. This may be due partly to the precedent set by the previous round of experience with discernment prayer. In Test-site A, on the other hand, while the potential for impact on organizational culture was recognized during the phase that fell during the research period, it was not fully embraced until the latter stages of the process.

Data from all three test-sites notes the impact of leadership on practices of communal discernment. All three make mention, in one way or another, of the levelling effect of the practice. In Test-site B, the question of leadership was addressed in the context of how a leader best leads in a culture where communal

discernment is taken for granted. In Test-site C, the emphasis is similar: in this case, the leader is described as someone who should not impose his or her plans on the members of the congregation or organization but should rather facilitate the listening process in which all members should be engaged.

The importance of listening was a theme that arose in all three settings. In Test-site C this was linked most directly to discerning God's future already present among God's people. In this sense, a communal discernment practice that interweaves Scripture-focused listening prayer and a reflection-based approach to organizational planning was very obviously amenable to the thinking around missional direction evidenced by the staff of this congregation. As the realization grew among participants at Test-site A that it was God's agenda and God's timetable that needed to take precedence in developing a strategic plan, the perceived value of practices of communal discernment increased as well.

Among the participants at Test-site B, the connection between communal discernment and missional direction was less evident; instead, the emphasis rested on the value of discernment prayer in containing the anxiety that faculty and staff were experiencing in relation to pending changes. The weight of the impact of communal discernment thus falls on the affective side in Test-site B, in terms of heightened assurance of God's presence in the midst of the community. Here there are similar parallels to the experience of Test-site A, where the majority of participants gained similar assurance, even in the first phase of experience with the practice.

Clarity regarding missional direction was affirmed by the data most vividly in Test-site C. This is not to say that no clarity was achieved in the other test-sites; rather, the fact that the planning processes were not yet completed at the time of evaluation in the two sites likely contributed to the sense that it was too early to draw connecting lines between the practice of communal discernment and missional direction-setting.

Participants in Test-sites B and C commented on the sense of community engendered by practices of communal discernment. This was articulated most clearly by the prayer facilitator and president in Test-site B, especially in relation to ongoing changes in the organizational culture where all voices would be valued, but was also borne out in Test-site C, where the purpose of getting staff-members “on to the same page” was recognized as having been accomplished.

While a broad range of conclusions emerging from the research findings will be discussed in Chapter Six, it is the potential for practices of communal discernment to bring the work of Jesus Christ into direct relationship with general organizational development practices that is of highest consequence to churches and ministry organizations. Leaders in all three of the field-testing locations made statements that relate to the sacred/secular issue and that confirm the potential for communal discernment practices to address that primary issue in Christian discipleship as it is expressed communally.

One of the leaders in Test-site A commented to me that "when we tried to move things our own way at our own speed, we got stuck, but when we allowed

God out of the box, we moved ahead...this led us into strategic thinking" (FN-A, July 12, 2011).

In Test-site B, the president indicated during the joint interview with the prayer facilitator that the experience with discernment prayer had helped in relation to the challenge that he and many others leaders face, given that there is "not a lot of study about what it looks like for an organization to be Spirit-led... Many are disgruntled with secular, business models of running Christian organizations, and are asking, What are appropriate models, How do you truly exist as a Christian group in various contexts?" (I-B, March 30, 2011).

The senior pastor at Test-site C was highly aware going into the practice of communal discernment of the implications that it has for organizational planning and organizational leadership. In an email to me, he referred to the work of Alan Roxburgh, who "stresses the importance of broad listening throughout the congregation" (FN-C, December 22, 2010). He expressed this idea further in the email, stating,

As people dwell in Scripture (lectio) and reflect on the generative narratives of the congregation (appreciative inquiry) leaders should seek to "listen people into free speech" ([Roxburgh's] phrase). It is out of these communal dialogues that the congregation begins to discern what God is inviting them into.

Thus, it could be said that the most significant outcome of the application of practices of communal discernment at the three test-site locations is reinforcement of the crucial importance of bringing awareness of the *missio Dei* and all that it implies into organizational planning.

To summarize briefly, it could be said that at all three test-sites the interweaving, inclusive and incarnational dynamic of communal discernment practices was one means, among others to be sure, of ensuring that God's mission was foremost as the organization, institution or congregational staff sought clarity in missional direction, unity among community-members and assurance of God's presence in times of transition and change.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research project yield several conclusions of importance to those who are seeking to navigate change and transition in Christian churches and organizations. These conclusions will be discussed in reference to the research questions outlined in Chapter One, which include:

- What is the significance of the difficulties around bringing prayer into organizational planning?
- Why do these difficulties arise?
- What is a theologically sound approach that could mitigate the difficulties in bringing prayer into organizational planning?
- How might the practice of communal discernment be seen as an effective response to the difficulties around bringing prayer into organizational planning?

Furthermore, the research undertaken through this project suggests areas for further research. This chapter provides some suggestions along those lines, and then ends with some personal reflections on the value and importance of the research effort.

Understanding the Issue

The first two research questions listed above suggest a way to understand the issue that underlies the opportunity to bring together prayer and organizational

planning processes. This in turn sets the stage for viewing practices of communal discernment as an appropriate response to the issue.

Significance of the Difficulties

In answer to the first research question, I conclude from my research that separating prayer from planning is significant because it precludes Christian churches and organizations from benefiting from the power of the Holy Spirit as Counsellor to help them in going through change and transition. Without a process for intentionally interweaving listening prayer and organizational planning, such groups forego the opportunity to gain clarity about missional direction, unity around shared purpose and assurance that God is present and leading in their midst.

The premise for this assertion rests on the understanding that in order to gain clarity about missional direction, we need to start with the understanding that it is God's mission, not ours, for which we need clarity. We are called by Jesus to participate in God's mission within the context of a dialogical relationship; a listening stance is required for us to discern what God is telling us about the part we are called to play. Prayer is thus a critical means of entering into the work of hearing God's words for missional direction and responding in obedience.

Furthermore, unity around shared purpose is more than a fortunate side-benefit of organizational planning resulting from good methods for maintaining feedback loops and building teamwork. Instead, such unity is rooted in the understanding that all members of the group are called individually by Jesus to be

his disciples, and thus all members carry joint responsibility – no matter their title or role in the church or organization – to listen for God’s words and follow God’s leading.

Similarly, assurance in the group goes beyond a feeling that may be associated with the sense that the group has done its job well and is reaping the benefits of God’s blessings after the work of planning is over. Rather, assurance of God’s leading and guiding presence is what we need to take hold of *during* times of change and transition. Group members can then relax into that presence, knowing that God will effect all that is needed for the group to participate effectively in the mission it has been called to.

Why Do the Difficulties Arise?

In answer to the second question, I conclude from my research that the difficulties around bringing together prayer and planning may stem from a dualistic worldview that divides the world into that which is “sacred,” and usually accessed and exercised privately, and that which is “secular” and presented publicly. This suggests that Jesus’ claim to lordship over all things is restricted to only some of those “all things,” and narrows down Jesus’ call to discipleship to a call that is relevant in some parts of life but not in others.

The relegation of life into some parts sacred and some parts secular can force churches and organizations to feel they must choose between either a “spiritual” approach to navigating change and transition or a “practical” approach. Either the group seeks to rely only on prayer, eschewing planning as a “worldly”

exercise that is deemed unfitting for a Christian church or organization, or it only plays lip service to prayer, with most energies going into the “real work” of planning.

Responding to the Issue

The second set of research questions deals with a response to the difficulties around bringing together prayer and planning processes that present themselves to those who would seek to develop approaches to missional direction-setting that resonate on both spiritual and rational levels. It is posited that this response is both theologically sound and effective.

Developing a Theologically Sound Approach

In attempting to address the issue of the separation of prayer and planning in the experience of Christian churches and organizations, I conclude from my research that we must start with the view that God’s mission is to reconcile *all things* in creation through the saving work of Jesus Christ and that God calls us to participate in that mission in the power of the Holy Spirit. No longer separating that which is “spiritual” from that which is “worldly,” we find ourselves able to take up our original creation mandate and develop obedient responses to Jesus’ call to discipleship in all areas of life, including organizational planning.

Listening prayer helps us to discern the voice of Jesus as his disciples. Listening prayer that is Scripture-focused is especially vital because it is a critical means by which we encounter Jesus as the Word. Rooting ourselves in a loving

relationship with him, we are enabled by the Holy Spirit to perceive God's words in God's Word and are thus able to participate more authentically and effectively in God's mission.

As suggested by the bodies of literature that relate to organizational planning in business settings as well as in the context of churches and organizations, planning methods that rely on reflection – in the latter case, on prayerful reflection – to assess current reality and discern patterns that hold promise for the future are well-suited to the task of determining strategic directions that a group should take.

The research findings related to: a) bringing prayerful reflection into organizational planning, b) the communal nature of Christian missional activity and c) the power of God's Word to convey God's presence suggest that an interweaving, inclusive and incarnational approach to organizational direction-setting constitute a theologically sound approach to the difficulties that inhibit churches and organizations from entering fully into God's mission.

Communal Discernment Practices as an Effective Response

My theoretical study, as well as the findings from the research I undertook in the three field-testing locations, lead me to suggest that prayer can be brought into planning in a way that affirms and is consistent with the calling of churches and organizations to demonstrate their engagement in God's mission not only in what they do but how they do it.

In terms of purpose, I conclude that communal discernment is an appropriate practice to undertake when a church or organization seeks to gain greater clarity around missional direction, unity around shared purpose and assurance of God's leading presence in the group. Furthermore, the field-testing research indicates that practices of communal discernment can help to allay anxiety in circumstances where anxiety levels would tend to run high. These factors suggest that the practice is appropriately entered into during times of transition and change, which typically contribute to high anxiety levels.

In terms of process, the research findings suggest that the practice is most effective when:

1. Participants are encouraged to adopt a listening stance as the basis for sensing God's leading presence, especially in reference to Scripture.
2. There is a clear sense of purpose going into the practice, as well as an intentional design related to maintaining strong feedback loops and "connecting the dots."
3. Trust levels among participants are high.

In terms of implications for leadership in churches and organizations, the findings suggest that practices of communal discernment have the potential to change a church or organization's culture and ethos, especially when it comes to how decisions are made. This leads to a related insight suggested by the research data: where leaders see themselves as co-listeners in the practice of communal discernment, they reinforce the need for all members of the group to discern

God's leadership for the church or organization, and thus discourage single reliance by them on their own leadership.

Furthermore, leaders who seek to nurture the development of a learning community within which organizational planning can take place will likely see enhanced benefit from communal discernment practices. Such a community – through practices that foster Scripture-focused listening prayer and appreciative reflection – is positioned to hear what God is saying about its current reality, especially in terms of where God is already at work, laying down tracks for the group to follow into the future.

As the research project progressed, my understanding of the practice of communal discernment increased tremendously. I came to see that prayer and planning can be interwoven through a discernment practice, undertaken communally, that emphasizes the incarnational importance of maintaining a clear and continuous focus on Scripture. Thus, I conclude strongly that this interweaving, inclusive and incarnational approach to organizational planning is an effective response to the tendency to split prayer from planning – a tendency that seriously hampers missional direction-setting.

For Further Research

While the three locations chosen to test the application of the communal discernment practice developed by the EFC staff suggest some potential for transferability to other locations as well, further research would be able to demonstrate how well-suited interweaving, inclusive and incarnational

approaches to missional direction-setting are in different ethnic and cultural contexts.

It would be interesting to test, for instance, whether the inclusive principle is one that may be fairly easily adopted in Caucasian communities, especially those that are populated by younger people, in comparison with communities where more traditional, hierarchical models of leadership prevail.

The interweaving and incarnational principles are also well worth testing in other settings. Is the sacred/secular divide more pronounced in Caucasian communities than in other groups, for instance? And, while we may make assumptions about the universality of the emphasis on listening prayer that is Scripture-focused, it may be that the sense of God's presence is made known in other ways in other communities.

One of the research findings that I found very intriguing was the impact of the practice of communal discernment on organizational culture and structures. Further investigation into the reach of the practice would be very instructive, especially with the assistance of the AQAL model for analytic purposes.

This model is described by Paul Bramer, building on work done by Ken Wilber and others in "An Integral Model for Missional Leadership." AQAL (which connotes All Quadrants, All Levels) addresses, in Bramer's words, "two fundamental orientations," namely, "the interior (or subjective) and exterior (or objective)," together with two "modalities": "the individual (or singular) and collective (or plural), wherein human interaction takes place" (Bramer 2010, 1-2).

The research undertaken thus far suggests that the practice of communal discernment introduces a specific set of behaviours into the "individual/exterior" quadrant (see Appendix E) in the context of organizational planning, which can have an immediate impact on the "individual/interior" and the "collective/interior" quadrants. When this occurs, the participants in the organizational planning process can be affected personally in that, for instance, their individual assurance in God's leadership is strengthened; the effect can also be experienced corporately at the same time, in that the organization's culture can begin to tilt away from anxiety toward greater trust that, as we saw in Test-site B, where it was asserted, "God is in the process."

What further research could uncover is the extent to which change in the individual/exterior quadrant moves through the individual/interior and the collective/interior quadrants into the fourth quadrant – the "collective/exterior" realm that describes organizational structures. It is change in this quadrant that would most impact the ways in which organizational activity is carried out, particularly – in the context of the practice of communal discernment – in terms of how decisions are made, by whom, and when and where they are made. My conjecture, which further research could explore, is that the impact of communal discernment practices would be most difficult to manage in this fourth quadrant, primarily because it impacts profoundly the role of the organization's leader and the role of everyone else in the organization as a result.

Further research could also pursue a closely related line of investigation: How does establishing and nurturing a learning community approach to

organizational development modify the impact of the practice of communal discernment in terms of all four quadrants? What kinds of intentional discernment structures and habits would such a community need to uphold in order to effectively manage transition and change in relation to the *missio Dei*?

Another question for further research is, What kind of impact does the spirituality of the individuals in the group (that which occurs in the first quadrant) have on the practice of communal discernment and on its effectiveness and outcomes? While the matter of individual spirituality was not explored intentionally in this research project, it is so closely related to corporate spirituality, and thus change in organizational culture, that it deserves closer examination.

Personal Reflections

The most striking aspect of the research project for me personally was my increasing appreciation for the way in which God speaks through Scripture into our everyday organizational lives. As I saw the connections being made between communal discernment practices and changes in organizational culture and organizational structures, I was convinced that the best of our missional intentions will flounder unless they are led by and enacted through the power of the Word.

The scope of God's Word is boundless – it is, after all, the dynamic creating force that was present at the beginnings of our world and the dynamic sustaining force that continues to hold our world together. For that Word to have become incarnate in Jesus, who thus contains both the creating and sustaining

force of the universe and yet speaks to us in a human voice that we can understand, leaves us word-less.

Through the Holy Spirit, the vacuum of our word-lessness becomes filled as we hear and take into ourselves God's Word in Scripture. In this sense, the incarnational principle applies even to us: we incarnate God's Word as we hear and respond obediently to it.

Capturing concepts like the interweaving, inclusive and incarnational principles in words was elusive at times, but ultimately very satisfying, especially because it demonstrated to me the truth in listening constantly for God's voice in Scripture and in reflective conversation as I discerned the path that my research and writing should take. I was tremendously assured, despite the sense at times of the enormity of it and at other times the absurdity of it (after all, isn't it all so *obvious?*), in knowing that I was not walking the research and writing path alone but instead could move forward in the assurance of God's love for me and God's words for me.

This experience gives me tremendous hope in relation to the enormous challenges that face us as Christians in the world today. By giving full effort to hearing God's words for us in community – both in Scripture and in appreciative reflection of everything in our contexts – I believe that we can truly gain clarity around our missional direction and, at the same time, assurance that God is leading us in a united effort – united with God and one another – to effect God's mission of reconciliation in the world.

All that I studied and experienced in this research project came down to a simple truth for me: If we're not listening, we're not following, which begs the question, whose mission are we on anyway? The challenge to those who are engaged in organizational planning in Christian churches and organizations is to develop learning communities that provide the environment, with the benefit of Scripture-focused listening prayer and appreciative reflection practices, for close examination of the organization's current reality, discovery of the missional tracks God could be laying down, and then determination of its missional direction in strategic terms. This kind of learning community would indeed bridge the sacred/secular divide and lean into God's mission with a greater sense of unity, missional clarity and assurance of God's leading presence.

APPENDIX A
OUTLINE FOR GROUP *LECTIO DIVINA*

1. Break up into small groups. Invite group members to determine who will pray a prayer – out loud at the end of the session – that summarizes what was heard through the *lectio* by the members of the group.
2. Opening Prayer: Ask for the leading of God's Spirit in the time ahead and for the ability to listen for God's voice in God's Word.
3. Before reading the focus Scripture passage for the first time, suggest that people listen for a word or phrase that resonates with them or that rises to the surface.
4. After first reading, ask: “What word or phrase rises to the surface for you or struck you in a significant way? Hold on to that word or phrase for a moment.... Now listen to the reading again, this time asking yourself, Why might that word or phrase be significant to you?”
5. After second reading: “Why do you think that the word or phrase that resonated for you may be significant for you? Reflect on this for a moment.... Now listen for a third time, this time asking God to show you how the significant word or phrase might apply to the matter that is requiring discernment.”
6. Ask participants to share briefly what they heard in the Scripture reading with the others in their group. Remind them that this is not a time for discussion or debate. Ask also that they remain silent after everyone has shared.

7. When all groups have come to silence, invite those who will be praying a summary prayer on behalf of their group to do so.

8. Close with praying “The Lord’s Prayer” together.

(This practice facilitated by author on December 1, 2012; January 10, 2011; April 19, 2011)

APPENDIX B

DISCERNMENT PRAYER OUTLINE, TEST-SITE B

1. Facilitator informs the group about the Scripture focus for the session.
2. Facilitator walks the group through a liturgy.
3. Facilitator reads Scripture related to the focus two times.
4. Facilitator asks questions to help participants “live into” the Scripture, e.g., How do you hear this Scripture calling us as a community? Where have you seen the Lord's blessings in light of this Scripture?
5. Participants are invited to engage in silent prayer.
6. Participants share out of the silent prayer.
7. Participants engage in observation and discussion regarding outcomes.
8. Participants engage in communal spoken prayer.

(FN-B, January 20, 2011)

APPENDIX C

OUTLINE FOR DISCERNMENT/PLANNING RETREAT – TEST-SITE C

7:30 am	Introductions / Orientation to the day
8:00	Engage in <i>lectio divina</i> ; record emerging themes
9:00	Review purpose of the church and its biblical/theological foundations
9:45	<i>Break</i>
10:00	Discover the changed landscape/context in which the church's purpose is exercised: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- What has changed?- Which changes are most significant and why?
11:45	<i>Lunch</i>
12:30	Identify impact of changes on the church's strategic priorities
1:15	Name next steps in relation to planning activity
1:45	Review communal discernment outcomes
2:00	Closing

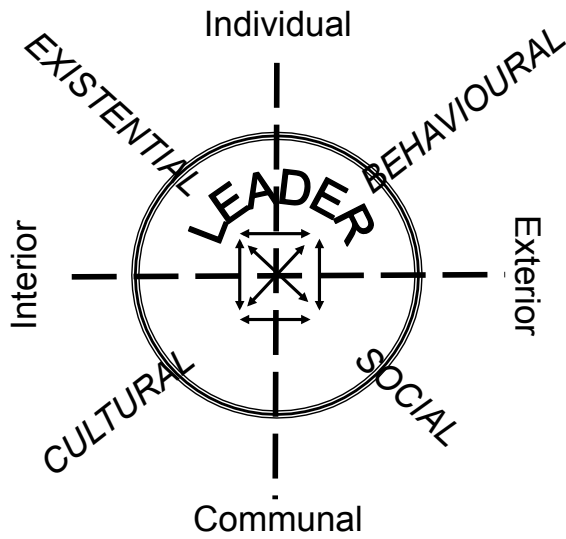
APPENDIX D
SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Were you familiar with communal discernment [or discernment prayer, in the case of Test-site B] practices before you participated in the process that we used for ———? If yes, what kinds of outcomes had you experienced when practicing communal discernment [discernment prayer] in the past? If no, please comment on your response to the introduction of the practice. What were your thoughts and feelings related to it?
2. Please describe your experience of communal discernment prayer [discernment prayer] as it was practiced in the planning process. Specifically,
 - a) What did you observe?
 - b) Did your thinking about ministry planning change or not change as you engaged in the process?
3. In what ways did the practice of communal discernment impact the outcome of the planning process?
4. Given your experience with communal discernment [discernment prayer],
 - a) What are the implications for individual and communal prayer [discernment prayer] practices in general?
 - b) What are the implications for leadership in Christian communities?

APPENDIX E

AQAL DIAGRAM

Dimensions of Integral Leadership



Adapted and simplified from Wilbur 2007, 1-49

Source: Bramer, Paul. 2012. Email to author. December 28.

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