

SUMMARY OF “PURSUING GOD’S WILL TOGETHER (RUTH HAYLEY BARTON)

LEARNING TO SEE

Ruth Hayley Barton begins her book with a study of John 9 and the differing perspectives and motives of the various observers. Many of them are blind to what is happening because they fail to ask the right questions. The right question, according to Jesus, was, What is God doing in this situation and how can I get on board with it? One of the first lessons we learn about discernment – from Jesus anyway – is that it will always tend toward concrete expressions of love with real people, rather than theoretical conversations about theology and philosophy. The punch line of the whole story is that those who admit their blindness see.

BEGINNING WITH SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

Corporate discernment begins with attending to the spiritual formation of each individual leader. Romans 12-15 focusses on how we are to live out our faith in practical ways with each other in community, and it is in this context that Paul says; “in order for this thing called the body of Christ to work, each of you must resist the process of being conformed to this world and enter into a process of spiritual transformation so that together you can discern and do the will of God.”

Groups that are determined to pursue God’s will together must begin by focussing on the dynamic spiritual transformation in the lives of individuals who comprise the group. The temptation, of course, is to skip the necessary prework and get on with the business of discernment. That is always a mistake.

Those who want to become discerners must have some basic spiritual practices in place to keep them in a posture of willing surrender to God.

1. **Solitude and silence.** Solitude is the foundational discipline of the spiritual life. It is time set aside to give God our full undivided attention. Spiritual leadership starts with listening for the one true Voice and learning to distinguish it from the other voices that clamour for our attention. Leaders more than anyone need to stop the flow of our own words and ideas long enough for God to be able to get a word in edgewise. Without this kind of listening and presence to God it is impossible to cultivate leadership that is distinctly spiritual.
2. **Engaging the Scriptures for spiritual transformation.** Silence is the best preparation for hearing from God through Scripture – whether we are alone or together. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “Silence before the Word leads to right hearing and thus also to right speaking of the Word of God at the right time. Much that is unnecessary remains unsaid. But the essential and the helpful things can be said in a few words.” One approach to Scripture that fosters this kind of openness and receptivity is *lectio divina*.
3. **Prayer.** Discernment takes place in the context of friendship with God and is cultivated through prayer. Prayer encompasses all the ways we communicate and commune with God. That said, there are three kinds of prayer that are particularly pertinent to discernment. The first is the prayer of quiet trust. The second is the

prayer for indifference, asking God to work in our hearts and make us indifferent to all but his will. The third is the prayer for wisdom.

4. **Self-knowledge and self-examination.** Parker Palmer makes this very sobering statement about leadership: “A leader is a person who must take special responsibility for what’s going on inside him/herself, inside his or her consciousness, lest the act of leadership create more harm than good. I have met many leaders whose confidence in the external world is so high that they regard the inner life as illusory, as a waste of time. But the link between leadership and spirituality calls us to re-examine that denial of the inner life.”

We start on the journey of becoming a discerning community once we are convinced that this attention to our own transformation as leaders is not a luxury or something we do when we have leftover time. It is the heartbeat of our shared life and the only way to get on the path of pursuing God’s will together.

LEADERS WHO ARE DISCERNING

The next step to becoming a leadership group that discerns God’s will together is to cultivate a shared working knowledge of the basics and for each individual to begin practicing discernment in their own lives. Paul Anderson, professor of biblical and Quaker studies at George Fox University, writes: “The Scriptures promise us that Christ’s Spirit will be with us, will guide us and will lead us into all truth. This is the most striking implication of one’s belief in the resurrected Lord. If Christ is alive, he desires to lead his church. If Christ desires to lead his church, his will should be sought. If his will can be sought, it can be discerned; and if it can be discerned, it deserves to be obeyed. This is nothing more than the basic Christian life.”

It is important that leaders have a deep belief in the goodness of God. This is because, in real terms, many of us don’t believe in God’s goodness enough to trust him with the things that are most important to us. Linked to this is the conviction that love is our ultimate calling – love for God, love for self, love for others and love for the world. We rarely hear leaders asking what love might be calling them to do in the context of making major decisions.

Discernment is much more than mere decision making; it is, first of all, a habit, a way of seeing that can permeate our whole life. Discernment is a quality of attentiveness to God that, over time, develops into the ability to sense God’s heart and purpose in any given moment. We become familiar with the tone, quality and content of God’s voice. We notice how God is present for us in the moment.

As important as the practices of discernment are, it would be improper to list them before the habit of discernment, because, if the Holy Spirit has not been welcomed into the life of the discernor, practices of discernment will be empty and impotent. The habit of discernment constitutes a way of being by which we are steeped in spirituality as a way of life. The habit of spirituality precedes the practices of discernment. Cultivating the habit of discernment means we are always seeking the movement of God’s Spirit so that we can abandon ourselves to it.

As we become more attuned to these subtle spiritual dynamics, we are able to distinguish between what is good (that which moves us toward God and his calling upon our lives) and what is evil (that which draws us away from God). Ignatius describes the inner dynamics of discerning the spirits as *consolation* and *desolation*. Consolation is the interior movement of the heart that gives us a deep sense of life-giving connection with God, others and our authentic self. Desolation is the loss of a sense of God's presence; indeed, we feel out of touch with God, with others and with our authentic self.

The habit of personal discernment establishes and cultivates the ability to pay attention to things many leaders are not accustomed to paying much attention to in a leadership setting.

The first and most essential dynamic of discernment is the movement towards indifference. This is "interior freedom" or a state of openness to God in which we are free from undue attachment to any particular outcome. There is a capacity to relinquish whatever might keep us from choosing God and love, and we have come to a place where we want God and God's will more than anything. Coming to this place is no small thing, and it is even harder in a leadership group setting.

A question that can help us identify where we need to be made indifferent is, What needs to die in me in order for God's will to come forth in my life? Or, Is there anything I need to set aside so that I can be open to what God wants?

When we know we are not indifferent and cannot accomplish indifference for ourselves, the prayer for indifference may take us into a period of waiting.

The movement toward indifference is the threshold between two worlds – the world of human decision making and the spiritual practice of discerning the divine will. In this waiting room of the soul we are made ready to pray the second prayer – the prayer for wisdom. The more complex the decisions facing us, the more we must move beyond the basics of discernment to considering inner dynamics which are harder to notice and interpret. We learn to listen to the stirrings of desire, to distinguish our true, God-given desires and calling from externally imposed "oughts" and "shoulds" and the compulsions of the false self. We are willing to pay attention and give credence to consolation and desolation.

In addition to paying attention to that which is conscious, discernment calls us to pay attention to any unconscious matter that comes up as well, whether slipping out in unedited conversation or revealed to us in dreams. When we sleep we are less ego-defended and more able to receive a prompting from God that is beyond what our cognitive faculties can accept.

This is a good place to mention that spiritual direction is a key component to a lifestyle of discernment for leaders. Thomas Merton writes, "A spiritual director is one who helps another to recognize and to follow the inspirations of grace in his life, in order to arrive at the end to which God is leading him." At the very least we need a wise spiritual friend in whose presence all inner dynamics can be attended to without bias.

Another dynamic of discernment is the ability to ask good questions and to allow those questions to help us gather data and gain perspective. These are not necessarily the questions that will get us the answers we want; rather they are the questions that will elicit the deeper wisdom we need. A good question has the power to throw open a door or a window so that a fresh wind of the Spirit can blow through.

Here are some examples of questions that open us to the search for wisdom:

- How does this choice fit with the overall direction and calling of God on my (our) life?
- Which choice brings the deepest sense of life, inner peace and freedom? Is there a growing sense of wholeness, authenticity and congruence with who I am (we are) in God?
- What is the deepest and most authentic desire relative to the choice I am (we are) facing? What is my (our) response when Jesus asks, “What do you want me to do for you?”
- Is there a particular Scripture that God is bringing to mind relative to this choice? What is it saying to me (us)?
- Is this choice consistent with the mind and heart of Christ?
- What is God doing in my character and spiritual growth, and will this choice serve to mature this growth and nurture the fruit of the Spirit?
- Given the primacy of love and unity in Jesus’ teachings, what does love call for in this situation?

We need to take time with questions such as these as we listen for the deeper answers they reveal. “We only want people at the leadership table who practice solitude and silence as a place for hearing God’s voice relative to decisions they face and who are open to incorporating this into their leadership discernment as well” (pg. 70).

COMMUNITY AT THE LEADERSHIP LEVEL

Those of us who come together to lead churches and organizations with a Christian purpose answer to a deeper calling: to move beyond teamwork and live into that great spiritual reality called Christian community. A New Testament perspective makes it clear that Christian community is made of people who gather round the transforming presence of Christ so that they can do the will of God (Mark 3:34-35). One of the fundamental differences between a team and a spiritual community is that a team assembles around a task and is bound together by a commitment to that task. Spiritual community, on the other hand, gathers around a Person – the person of Christ present with us through the Holy Spirit.

What makes a community distinctly spiritual is that we gather around the presence of Christ, mediated through the Holy Spirit. We are unified by our commitment to be transformed in Christ’s presence through the work of the Holy Spirit, so we can discern and do the will of God as we are guided by the Spirit. We participate in Jesus’ prayer “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done” in our own small corner of the world. Such community recognises the activity of the Trinity as active in our lives, constantly creating, healing,

freeing, encouraging, calling us forth, uniting with us in sorrows and joys, in trials and triumphs. The group looks for this action of the Trinity in a communal way rather than an individualistic way.

For many leadership groups that have fallen into a pattern of work that inhibits their members finding their true selves and pursuing their true desires, the idea that we are called to gather first of all to be together around the presence of Christ in life-transforming ways, is a truly winsome thought. From within this priority on transformational community we are then able to sense God calling us to do something together.

Since spiritual transformation results in the ability to discern God's will, so mission often emerges when Christians gather – whether we intend it or not! But whatever mission we are called to needs to grow out of and remain grounded in the commitment to gather around the transforming presence of Christ and to listen for his direction in our lives. What we do flows out of who we are in Christ.

Any approach to leadership discernment that fails to wrestle with the power of organizational systems will have limited spiritual effect over the long haul. Authentic spiritual transformation confronts us not only on the personal level, it also confronts systemic realities as well. It exposes the ways that our life together has either a transforming or a deforming effect on us. Every church or organization has its own culture – a normal way of being and working together. The more deeply an individual engages in the life of the group, the more he or she will be shaped by the spirit of it, often without even being aware of it.

Cultivating a culture of spiritual transformation that results in the ability to discern the will of God does not happen by accident. It is led very intentionally by leaders who are committed to spiritual transformation. It is led thoughtfully by leaders who are 1) clear that spiritual community is what they are called to be; 2) intentionally embracing the values that undergird community; 3) willing to engage the practices that help them live out their values in concrete ways; 4) committed to covenant relationships. There is no short cut for this. The good news is that a leadership group committed to spiritual transformation will automatically begin to change the culture of their community.

VALUES THAT UNDERGIRD COMMUNITY

Once a leadership group has developed this longing for community and experienced the “conversion to community” – in other words, they are committed to becoming a transforming community – the first step is to articulate the values and principles that will guide them in this holy endeavour. Values are not ideals, they are actual ways of being and qualities of character that are real and possible for human beings, although living them often comes at a price. Once shared values have been articulated, the group can identify those practices that will help them live their values in concrete ways, then they can establish a covenant with each other, which “ratifies” or makes their commitment real.

Some values are very general and foundational; other values are more specific to the unique calling of each community and the particularities of their shared life. Whether general or

particular, each leadership group will need to identify and articulate their values in ways that are biblically sound, relationally healthy, spiritually enlivening and meaningfully expressed in their context.

Coming down to a personal level, group spiritual transformation assumes the commitment of each member to clarify their personal values through a rule of life – spiritual rhythms that keep us open to and available for God’s transforming work so that we are bringing a transforming self to leadership as an act of worship. From this commitment to personal transformation, leaders go on to build a transforming community. It forms a “virtuous circle” where the life of the group together also has a transforming effect on the individuals involved.

The defining characteristic of spiritual community is a shared commitment to move forward as we are led by the Spirit, rather than simply by our own thinking and planning. Planning is the second step, rather than the first; discernment which listens deeply for God’s direction is a precursor to any plans we make.

Once the team is defined around its commitment to shared values, the aim should be discernment via equality and inclusiveness. A discerning group is one in which individuals find their place and bring their gifts to the community on the basis of their relationship with God, their calling from God and their gifting by God.

Closely related to the commitment to spiritual transformation is the commitment to increasing levels of self-knowledge and a willingness to take responsibility for negative patterns that effect our interactions in community. Spiritual transformation takes place primarily in those places where we are not like Christ. In community, others become agents of God’s troubling grace, giving us many opportunities to see ourselves more clearly, to repent and to confess our sins to one another in order to receive grace and healing. We are called to respect the profound role that acknowledging our brokenness plays in the unfolding of the spiritual life and in the formation of true spiritual community. Coming face to face with our weakness and being honest about it opens us to the gift of community and also releases God’s power among us, within us and beyond us. Growing self-knowledge is a crucial aspect of engaging fruitfully in a discernment process because it reduces the risk of the community falling apart due to people not being willing or able to own their negative patterns and sins.

Closely related to this is the commitment to truth and the groups willingness to offer truth to one another in love and gentleness. Anything less than clear, honest communication patterns places the community in peril. When we fail to be truthful with each other, we strike at the heart of community and undermine its viability. It is impossible to be in community without a commitment to truth telling.

The essential accompaniment to telling each other the truth is lovingkindness. Kindness is a basic characteristic of mature spirituality, which makes it all the more distressing that Christian community is often unkind. In any transforming community the commitment to kindness and truth in combination must be a core value. Flowing from this, and important aspect of long-term community is agreeing to very concrete commitments regarding how the

group will handle inevitable conflict. Commitment to engaging conflict in a way that changes us for the better and deepens our unity in Christ is more challenging than conflict management or conflict resolution, and it is certainly the opposite of conflict avoidance.

Two other key values are gratitude and celebration. Transforming communities look for opportunities to celebrate God's presence and activity among them.

"So here is my conclusion: When all else has failed and we have failed each other, there is still the Story – the story of Jesus, who lived according to a powerful set of values that must have seemed just as impossible then as they do now. It is a story that inspires us every time. With each loss and each gain, each setback and each step forward, there is always this sense of "Where else would we go?" What else would we want to shoot for?" And so we find ourselves in the Story again. We get in touch with what we value most deeply. As God works in us, we repent of our failure to fully embrace our values. And we try again – only this time with more wisdom." (Pg. 106)

PRACTICES FOR OPENING TO GOD TOGETHER

Articulating values does not guarantee that a group will be able to live by them. All of us struggle with staying true to our values in the rough and tumble of leadership. When decisions need to be made and action needs to be taken, it is hard to trust that the Spirit's presence and activity can bring about unity. So we fall back on familiar methods and stratagems.

Another reason it is hard to live by our values in the rough and tumble of leadership is that somehow the mission always wants to overtake our essence as a community gathered around the presence of Christ. No matter how committed we are to community there is always the temptation to allow the demands of ministry to squeeze out the time it takes to cultivate community. As much as we are committed to discernment, sometimes decisions get made too quickly, without enough time to listen fully to the wisdom of the whole community.

It is hard to resist the temptation to value doing over being and becoming. Commitment to community – especially at the leadership level – is profoundly countercultural. Life in community can never be about merely getting the job done – as important as that is. It must also always take into account how we get the job done and whether we are transformed or deformed in the process. There are three key questions that the group must repeatedly ask:

- What are the practices, relationships and experiences that will help us stay in a process of spiritual transformation – together?
- What practices will help us stay open to the presence of Christ in our midst so that we can discern God's will together?
- How can we order our life together so we are becoming increasingly abandoned to God rather than being driven by our egos and caught up in our own compulsions?

The first shared commitment should be that each person in the team has an established personal rule of life and that together the members of the team agree to mutual accountability. The disciplines of the spiritual life are supported by the team practice –

prayer, solitude, retreat, sane rhythms of work and rest (including Sabbath), reading and reflecting on Scripture, self-examination, honouring the health of the body, spiritual direction and celebration. When scheduling, the group needs to talk about the pace of life and whether it is leading to exhaustion. Leaders are stewards of organizational energy. They inspire or demoralize others first by how effectively they manage their own energy and next by how well they mobilize, focus, invest and renew the collective energy of those they lead.

PRACTICES FOR LISTENING TO EACH OTHER

Leadership discernment requires us to be open and receptive to each other with God. This is a much more vulnerable stance than most of us are willing to take in leadership settings. The truth is, most leadership groups are not safe enough for those present to offer the wisdom that comes only from being in touch with what is truest within them. A commitment to leadership discernment requires cultivating an environment in which it is safe for people to speak from their heart and soul, not just their mind. A community that exists to discern and to do the will of God must be a place where people can freely offer what they are in touch with at the soul level.

Whatever else we are seeking to discern about God's will, we can be sure that God wants us to love each other. And the outcome of spiritual transformation is an increasing capacity to love God and love others, which can be measured in concrete ways. In order for community to be sustained at any level of human relating our commitment to love – not as an emotion, but as a set of attitudes, behaviours and concrete actions – must be primary. This simple truth easily gets lost in the press of organizational or congregational life. We can do many wonderful, altruistic, strategic things, but if we are not loving each other in the midst of it all, our accomplishments are empty from the standpoint of spiritual integrity.

When there is misunderstanding or hurt in a particular relationship, when there is resistance to a particular decision taken, it is important that the group take time and space to pay attention, because unity is Christ's will and longing for us. We are committed to graciously telling truth to each other – even when truth is challenging – because honesty is deeply honouring to persons and relationships. Transforming community means valuing people and the quality of our relationships more than programmes and products.

A surprising thing is that, after committing to discernment together, one still finds people within the team who continue to make significant decisions without engaging the group they are part of. One of the reasons for this may be that the commitment to discernment runs so counter to the independent mindset of our Western culture. Also, when the stakes get high, people struggle to trust each other, to trust God and to trust the process of shared discernment.

It is important that leaders talk about the role of truth telling in the leadership community, not just because it is morally right, but also as a concrete discipline that we are committed to practicing together. In a church culture increasingly influenced by secular leadership models that are more concerned with spinning the truth than telling the truth, knowing what this commitment means to us specifically is critical. When any expression of Christ's

church sees itself more as a corporation than as a community, it is easy to rationalise degrees of truth telling.

We live in a culture that promotes a profound sense of denial about the sin in our lives and the way our sin wounds others and impacts the groups we are part of. It is a natural tendency of human nature to pin the blame on others rather than taking responsibility for ourselves. We are much more prone to go to great lengths to avoid owning our stuff, or at least to soften it to make it seem less significant than it is. The scriptural instruction “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” is profoundly countercultural for most leadership settings.

Confession is the culmination of our personal practice of self-examination. It leads to increasing self-awareness, which increases the health and functionality of our life together in community. Healthy self-examination and confession is the process of seeing something that went wrong in an attitude, behaviour or action and how it affected (affects) our presence and behaviour in the group. Then there is the willingness to name it for what it is and also name what was going on inside us, seeking some understanding of the inner dynamics that caused this behaviour.

It is one thing to believe in the idea of being open to the transforming presence of Christ when we are in the midst of conflict, but it is quite another matter to actually practice it. First we need to affirm Jesus’ promise to be with us in the midst of conflict, and find ways of being open to his presence. Second we need to affirm that conflict can be the catalyst for the needed growth and transformation of everyone involved, if we choose to engage it as such. With this in mind, we resist triangulation or third party conversations and commit to direct face to face communication. Even in the context of conflict we remain engaged in increasing self-awareness through the process of self-examination and in a commitment to the discerning of God’s will

Ultimately, if all avenues, including mediation by an objective trusted third party, have been exhausted, and one party to the conflict steadfastly refuses to respond to the community as it calls for reconciliation and conflict transformation, that person must be excluded for the health and well-being of the community. Although we must be careful how we carry this out, part of the shepherding function of those in leadership is being prepared to make the hard call when necessary.

A COVENANT THAT PROTECTS COMMUNITY

The end of the process involves the production of, and commitment to, a written covenant that expresses the values and mutual commitments of the community. A written covenant makes everyone’s commitment real and provides a way for the group to claim shared ownership for their behaviour. Without an actual covenant or written agreement a group may not be clear about what they have agreed on, let alone what it means in the day to day life in leadership community. Spiritual community is so tender and fragile that it requires some protective structures in order for it to survive.

We put covenants in place when what is at stake is so important that we dare not leave the relationship up to chance. Covenant making and covenant keeping are rooted in who God is, as even a cursory reading of Scripture shows. Thus, a group's willingness to covenant together around shared values and practices gives definition to its commitment to follow God together. There is something about entering into a covenant relationship that reflects who God is and forms a more Christlike character within us.

We bind ourselves to each other in times of strength so that in moments of weakness we do not become unbound. When we are faced with a decision that requires discernment and everything in us screams to make the decision ourself; when someone in the group is experiencing consolation or desolation and we are too busy or too annoyed to pay attention; when there is relational disease or even conflict and we would rather talk about it with others than go directly to that person; when there is truth that is hard to say and we would rather not say it; when we know that there is something in ourselves that is not quite right and is hampering our ability to be a discerning presence in the group but we don't want to face it – we realize how demanding living in covenant community is, and we need the strengthening and accountability of a written covenant.

It is important that we make our covenant very humbly and with a great deal of realism about our chances of actually being true to it. We must remember that we cannot force people to be who they don't want to be, or to do what they don't want to do or are unable to do. Leadership is not about control.

Here are six suggested steps in the process of defining a community covenant:

1. The group clarifies its values with one another, noting key Scriptures God has used with them along the way.
2. They identify the practices that help them to live those values in concrete ways.
3. They explore and experiment with a realistic and doable rhythm of practicing the disciplines.
4. They then record their values and practices, providing copies to the group and inviting input.
5. They incorporate that input and present it again for the group's final approval.
6. They ratify the covenant through symbol and ritual that are periodically repeated.