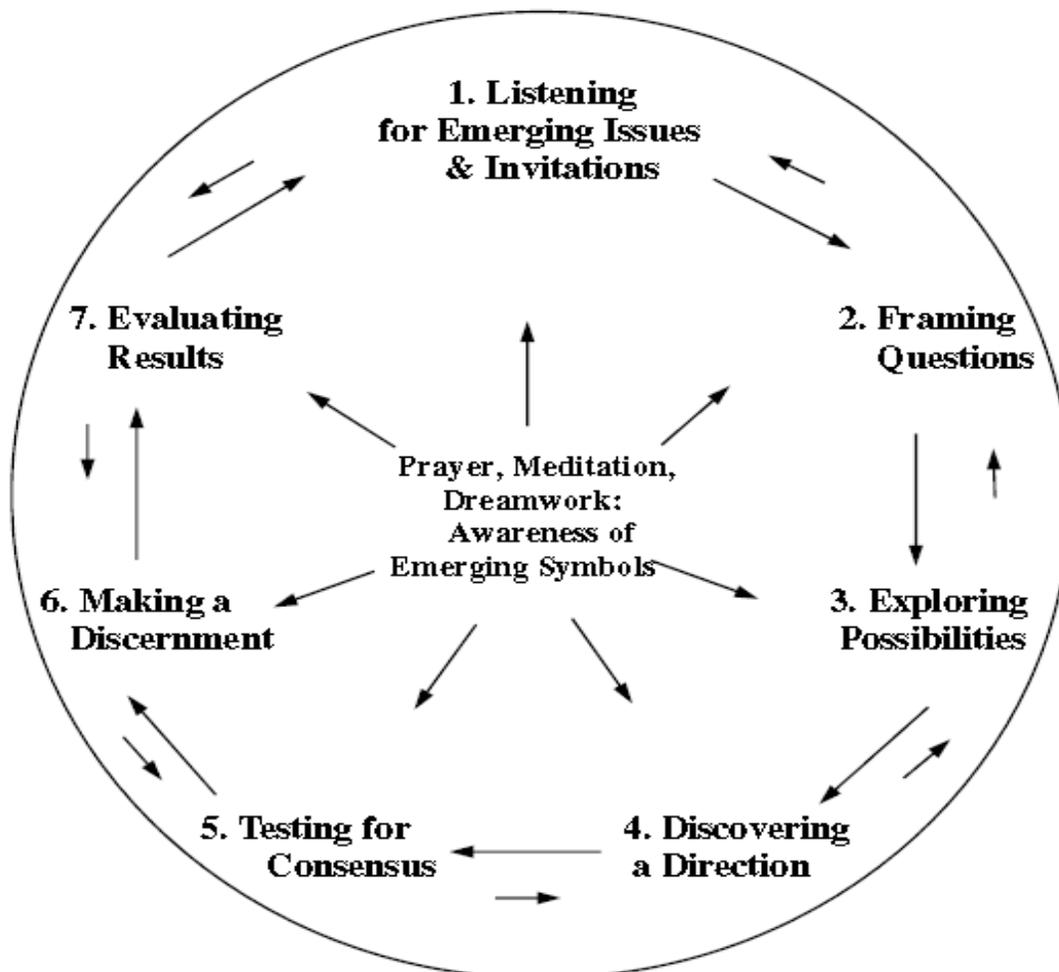


Spiritual Discernment Cycle



Movements are dynamic and similar to a dance. Sometimes the movement takes us in the *opposite* direction of the large arrows because of new information that we need to bring into the discernment. Prayer and other spiritual disciplines and practices (center of the circle) that help surface depth symbols that connect us with God as the creative source of guidance is maintained throughout the discernment process.

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 Rev. 7/03

This cycle is a graphic representation of the terrain that typically must be traversed in making a spiritual discernment. The steps on the journey are not always sequentially followed. There can be movement back and forth between locations in the cycle, with an ultimate goal of making a discernment and testing the results. Reaching a discernment may result in the emergence of new issues or invitations from God for new discernment. This journey with God is lifelong!

Prayer, Meditation, Dreamwork: Awareness of Guiding Symbols. Located in the center of the chart and permeating the whole of discernment work is the prayerful dimension of living. There is a contemplative dimension to discernment where receptivity to God's leading is valued and sought. We may move back and forth between the receptive silence, radical emptying, and holy mystery of the *apophatic* dimension of prayer; and the images, thoughts, and relational truths of the *kataphatic* dimension of prayer. Awareness of words that have power for us, phrases from scripture, visual images, music and lyrics, dreams, events that catch our attention, the way the sacraments shape us: these all hold the potential for being ways that God whispers to us of divine desire. A prayerful life cultivates an appreciation for the potential of God to guide us through symbol-language. It also calls us to make ongoing discernment *within* the process of discernment by exploring such questions as: What is the source of this symbol that has emerged and holds power for me/us? Is it life-giving even while it might be challenging? Does it bring us beyond our selves alone? Does it speak to our deepest sense of truth? Does it seem consistent with our best understanding of God's great desires for humanity as revealed in scripture and in the wisdom of our spiritual teachings? Does it speak of the paschal mystery, the way of the cross and new life in Christ? By such questions we can test the symbol for its validity as a guide for us.¹

1. *Listening for Emerging Issues and Invitations.* Spiritual discernment is a conscious action and requires a stance of active listening in life, an awareness that the issues and experiences that catch our attention may include hidden within them an invitation from God for our faithful and deliberate response. Concrete life situations are the context for our discovery of God's desires and directions for our life and the life of our communities. For St. Clement's Church, the project site for this study, the emerging issue had to do with calling a priest. But underlying that issue were the invitations from God to own their grief and honor their healing needs, to become free to look at a variety of ways they can configure their ministry and common life, and to discover and articulate their deepest sense of who they are and what they are called to be prior to searching for a rector.

2. *Framing Questions.* The kind of questions we ask give powerful shape and direction to our inquiry and set limits on the scope of our discovery. In order for spiritual discernment to occur we need to frame our inquiry and structure our path of discovery in a way that makes the search for God's direction central. So the kind of questions we ask makes a big difference! For example, if a church is experiencing a crunch in their budget it is one thing to ask, "What expenses can we cut and still maintain the highest quality possible in our church programs?" That question is probably familiar to many vestries, bishop's committees, and clergy. But that is a management-oriented question. A spiritual discernment-oriented question might go like this: "How might God want us to handle our budget? What might God wish us to emphasize in our financial stewardship?" The discernment-oriented question may take the governing body down a path of examining their sense of the mission of the parish and how that is funded, as well as looking at the policies and assumptions that shape their understanding of stewardship, faith, and fiscal responsibility, and how they usually go about seeking God's guidance in the structuring of their budget. It is much more likely that this kind of question will ground the exploration of the issue in a sense of God's presence in the community, and become an opportunity to discover God's desire for the community.

¹In this paper, the symbol is called a "primary symbol" if it serves as a guide to the life of the faith community.

3. *Exploring Possibilities.* This phase of a deliberation is probably quite familiar to anyone who knows creative problem-solving techniques. It is a time for entertaining many possibilities, for brainstorming, for being open to the creative and new inspiration. Eventually the options are out in the open and it becomes time to narrow the possible directions down to a few that have a sense of deeper merit. Next all the available data is gathered for investigating the value and feasibility of each option.

Here is where the discernment tradition calls for something different than a business model or a decision based on a simple preference or inclination. The discerners are asked to pray for an inner freedom that seeks God's deepest good rather than our own personal preferences. Results of the investigation of possible options are shared completely and weighed based on that inner freedom of discernment.

4. *Discovering a Direction.* Eventually there may be a sense of clarity or a deeper sense of peace around a particular option. Things may seem to converge and a direction has a special sense of rightness, of blessing about it. Sometimes it seems perfectly clear to everyone that this choice is the right one, that God has revealed this direction to us. But more often we go into the selection of a direction with a sense that this one option seems to be the best of our choices, but we could be wrong. And others may disagree. Which leads us to the next step in the dance.

5. *Testing for Consensus.* In community life, as well as individual life, some things are just too important to ram through as a personal preference or have a majority vote decide. The spiritual discernment traditions in various ways emphasize the importance of group unity and cohesion and having a process that avoids win/lose types of decision-making. Major questions of policy, call, development of a congregational sense of ministry, deliberations about a church's mission – these are questions that call for consensus-building. Consensus does not necessarily mean unanimity. But it does mean that there is a sense that everyone that is responsible for the decision has been fully heard and their truth has been received.

In seeking consensus it can be helpful for the community to establish a policy (before attempting a particular discernment) about what percentage can be considered a minimum level of consensus or else the community clearly needs to do more discernment work – and probably go back to an earlier step in the discernment cycle. The consensus means that to the best of our ability we have tried to discern the will of God in this matter and the amount of people requisite to establishing a consensus has been met.

People can have serious reservations about a direction and still abide by the wisdom of the consensus. If strong concerns are shown, it is important to enter the reservations in the record of the deliberations. The concerns that are expressed may prove prophetic and the decision may need to be revisited in the future in further discernment.

In individual discernment the idea of testing for consensus is not as formal, but the principle still holds that even as a person seeks the views of the community (church members, family, friends, spiritual director) in exploring possibilities (step 3) so it is important to seek input from the community after the person has made a tentative decision (step 4). Does this direction seem to fit well with others' views of you? If this decision affects others how might it impact them, and do they agree with your direction or at least can they go along with it? How many people do you need to hear concerns from before you consider that you may be on a wrong track?

6. *Making a Discernment.* Once consensus has been reached we can say that we have made a discernment. Hopefully the process has been done both with faith and with humility.

Usually once a discernment has been made there is a sense of God's peace, which does not ignore challenges, and a release of creative energy for living into the direction. However, sometimes there is still quite a bit of uncertainty. That does not necessarily mean we have made a wrong discernment. We have to live into the mystery of our human limitations and the mystery of God's purposes. If we have made a wrong discernment we will probably recognize it later and begin a new time of discerning, for God does not abandon us.

7. *Evaluating Results.* As we live into the direction we have discerned, it is important to take note of and evaluate the results of the discernment. Is this path, this direction, into which we are living, producing good fruit? What kind of emotional and spiritual climate is being generated by this direction? Is it giving us the results we expected or is something else happening? If concerns were expressed by a minority, is a situation emerging that justifies the concerns? Are new issues, new invitations emerging from this path that is calling for a new round of discernment?

And so you have it – a journey into the terrain of spiritual discernment with God and with your fellow companions accompanying you. It takes you to questions that touch the deepest parts of you and your world, and a way of living with those questions with a freedom and trust that is truly graced.

Excerpt from D.Min. thesis, "To Have the Mind of Christ: Symbol Guidance and the Development of Communal Spiritual Discernment Processes for Parish Life, Mission, and Ministry", by Daniel Prechtel, Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, May, 2002.