



LIFE AFTER COVID-19

The Crucial Need for Discernment When we Return

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This monograph started out its life entitled, HOLY CONVERSATION: THE 'HARD' IS WHAT MAKES IT GREAT/ What TMF has learned from five years of strategic discernment work. Its purpose was to make the case for the importance of the patient, reflective work we call discernment as compared to the practical, logistical work we call planning in the life of a congregation. The desired outcome of the paper was to help leaders see the crucial difference between those two things and to lean toward the work of discernment in the liminal moment we were in prior to the 2020 General Conference in Minneapolis.

Then, all of a sudden, the liminal moment was not about the spiritual lethargy of the UMC, but the complete disorientation of the world's people and commerce. In the space of less than two weeks, church leaders had to prepare to put much of their ministry online while simultaneously caring for their bewildered people. They had to get accustomed to Zoom at warp speed.

Because of this unprecedented change, the need for discernment is even more important than it was prior to March of 2020. So, the original monograph still remains, but there is additional thought about why discernment is crucially necessary as we listen for what God is saying to the post-pandemic church.

In the 1992 comedy about women's professional baseball during World War II, ***A League of Their Own***, there is a scene in which the deciding game of the World Series pits two highly competitive sisters against each other. The older sister, Dottie, has consistently outshone her younger sister, Kit, and it makes for real tension between them.

On the eve of the deciding game, in which the sisters are to face each other, the crusty, dried-up manager of Dottie's team, Jimmy Dugan, finds her packing up her car.

"Where do you think you are going?", asks Dugan.

Dottie fabricates a reason why she's just not up to pitching in the final game, and then says, "It just got too hard."

Dugan, turning momentarily wise, says, "If it were easy, everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great."

Discerning the difference God is calling a congregation to make, especially in the radically disorienting moment we currently inhabit, is the hardest work the leaders of any congregation have to do. But the hard is what makes it great.

Following the leadership of Gil Rendle, in 2010 TMF undertook the work of helping churches discover the difference between planning and discernment. Both are important for the vitality of a congregation, but they serve different purposes, and there are clearly seasons in which a church must lean much more toward one of them. The season full of unknowns in which we now live clearly calls for us to lean more toward discernment. Church leaders demonstrated remarkable adaptability as they learned a variety of technical skills and practices, and now they are called on to invest deeply in re-assessing what God is asking of them.

Discernment can certainly lead to concrete action, but it is first and foremost about patient, courageous listening. The Holy Conversations process, developed by Gil Rendle and by Alice Mann, is the resource we have used to assist congregations in this courageous work. What follows are some of the chief discoveries we've had over the last five years about the path to discernment and how our current crisis affects the way in which we do ministry.

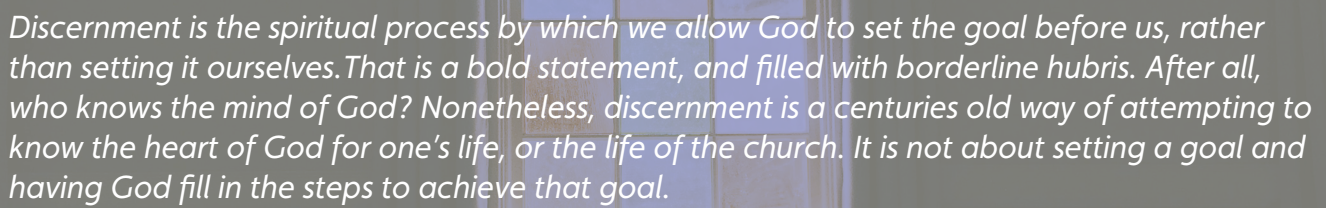
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PLANNING AND DISCERNMENT

When congregations decline or lose focus, it's not unusual for one or more leaders to step forward and say some version of "We've got to DO something." It's typical of our work at TMF to enter a congregation at just this point. It's also typical that congregations are looking for answers and for quick fixes. When this is the case, almost all churches turn to planning.

When congregations face a crisis, they also turn to planning. It's about doing obvious things immediately. It's about only acting on essential things and not worrying about others. Crisis planning has an assumed 'WHY', so the emphasis is placed on 'HOW.' When a tornado hits, we do not ask why we should look for the missing. We decide how we are going to do it. When we were told to shelter in place, we did not ask why we would have worship anywhere other than the sanctuary. We made preparations for how to do it.

In every day situations, planning is about making day-to-day things happen. It is about clear policies and procedures, consistent communication and messaging, well-focused events, and the alignment of resources and priorities. Planning is the roadmap that gets the congregation from here to there. It pays attention to systems and details. Planners ask, "How do we get this done? How do we get from here to there?" Planning is technical work.

But discernment is **spiritual** work. As our TMF colleague, Scott Sharp, puts it:



Discernment is the spiritual process by which we allow God to set the goal before us, rather than setting it ourselves. That is a bold statement, and filled with borderline hubris. After all, who knows the mind of God? Nonetheless, discernment is a centuries old way of attempting to know the heart of God for one's life, or the life of the church. It is not about setting a goal and having God fill in the steps to achieve that goal.

He continues by pointing out that discernment is never a solitary practice. It is an act of communal listening. Drawing on the teaching of St. Ignatius of Loyola, he notes that the process of discernment is about discovering and naming our attachments: both the life-giving attachment to God and neighbor that God's love makes possible, and the attachment to people, things, ideas, and beliefs which lead us away from the love of God and neighbor. Attachment will be one of the central issues as we slowly return to church life after shelter-in-place. We will come up against just how important the room is to our Sunday School experience, or how important singing is to public worship.

The greatest attachment we encounter in churches is to their past, and to the practices and activities which governed their past. While it's essential to learn from our **past**, it's debilitating to be wedded to it.

Discernment centers in asking, "God, what are you doing in me and in this congregation?" It involves curiosity and patient attention. It's about looking for patterns in congregational life, and noticing who is courageous, generous, wise, and trustworthy. It calls for vulnerability and honesty. It is about what the congregation is like **now**, not what it used to be like. And because things can be so disorienting during a crisis, patience can be in very short supply.

Discernment is about determining the capacity of the congregation to do more than the course correction that planning sometimes requires. It may be about throwing away the map and charting a whole new course. The question may not be, "Should we do worship in person AND online?" The question may be, "What did we learn about ourselves and about God when worship had to be dramatically altered by being online?"

Discernment is looking for where God is active in the community. Discerning leaders ask, "God, what is the difference you are calling us to make in this congregation and our community? What were you trying to show us about our neighbors when the virus kept so many of us indoors?"

Some possible discernment questions:

- What is the biblical story we are now inhabiting? What does that tell us about ourselves?
- What are our values, and how do we actually behave?
- What is not an option for our congregation?
- What are we good at, and not good at?
- Who do we have the readiness to serve?
- Who must we admit we do not have the readiness to serve? Why is this true?
- If this congregation has a sin to confess, what is it?
- Do we work more from a culture of scarcity or from a culture of abundance?

Some discernment questions that have arisen during the COVID-19 crisis

- What skills and abilities did we discover as we adjusted our ministry to meet the circumstances? What are we better at doing now? What was really hard about adjusting things?
- What did we miss the most by not being together? What did we discover isn't as important to the life of our church as we thought?
- Every congregation must answer the question, "Who is our neighbor?" How different is our answer to that question now than it was before COVID-19?

Some possible planning questions:

- Do we have the structure in place to accomplish our calling?
- Are leaders already in place, or do we need to nurture new leaders?
- How will we communicate what we have discerned, and how will we build buy-in?
- How will we match the spiritual gifts of our leaders with the tasks at hand?
- Are the right voices at the table? Who have we excluded who ought to be here?

Some planning questions that have arisen during the COVID-19 crisis

- How will we contact every member of the congregation to make certain they have food?
- Who can help us assess our AV needs so that our online service is easy to access, and has adequate sound and light?
- What will it take to increase the percentage of our congregation who give online?

Discernment is frequently missing.

Each year, the staff members of TMF make thousands of visits to the churches and non-profits of Texas and New Mexico to see if we can help them in the achievement of the missions to which God is appointing them. Everywhere we go we find faithful people planning worship, creating small group opportunities, planning events like Vacation Bible School, and imagining new mission trips. We also find them maintaining their buildings, raising money, and communicating with their members and participants. We thank God for the continued faithfulness of the durable saints of Texas and New Mexico United Methodism.

Yet there is one thing frequently missing from the work of the churches we visit: the courage to do the work of discernment. Due to the tyranny of the immediate, i.e., the tendency to allow what is at hand to stop us from taking the longer, deeper look at the life of the church, we turn to what we have always done. We do day-to-day or week-to-week planning, hoping that the activity we have just planned will provide the energy and growth we've all been hoping for.

During the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, the tyranny of the immediate was very real and people responded with courageous planning. What we don't yet know is how courageous the post-COVID-19 work of discernment will be.

Under more normal circumstances, what we don't do is to step back and ask, "How did we get here? What is it about us that causes people to visit only once? What do we actually know about the people of our community?" We don't step back from our planning long enough to do the hard work of discernment. It's as if we are saying, "God, we're too busy trying to do your work to give any attention to what you are asking us to do." Under the current circumstances, it will be even harder to do the work of discernment because we will be so tempted to find our way back to the familiarity of the 'old normal.'

This monograph is an invitation to step back from the day-to-day work of the church and spend real time in discernment. It is a practiced art with its own questions and methods, and we must practice. In what follows, you'll find the story of what we have learned in the discernment work we've done with congregations all over Texas and New Mexico through the Holy Conversations (HC) process. We hope it provides insight into what engaging in discernment might mean to your congregation.

The work is hard.

The work of discernment is hard for a variety of reasons.

The typical congregant cannot name the mission of her or his own church beyond the global, aspirational mission statement of the United Methodist Church (i.e., making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world). While able to name the church's activities, he or she is hard pressed to name the desired outcomes of those activities. We know what we're doing, but we don't know the difference we are making.

The typical congregation is not practiced in naming its own story: its origins, its historical high and low points, and its distinctiveness in its own community. The natural energy and motivation provided by that story are missing.

While every congregation has its own narrative around things like money ("We talk too much about money," or "When there is a need, we are always generous") or ministry with children and youth ("We used to have 100 in our youth group and all the parents were involved"), those narratives go either unspoken or unexamined. Important insight and motivation can come from identifying those underlying narratives which shape the congregation.

The missional focus which a discernment process can bring to a congregation threatens the status quo of congregational life. The questions, "Who is our ministry for?" and "How will we know we have been faithful to our mission?" are often difficult to answer. We judge the success of our mission efforts by how many things are happening more than by the measured difference they are making.

Discernment invariably uncovers the difficulties and burdens of clinging to ministry models and assumptions rooted in a previous generation.

Wittingly or unwittingly, we cling to the attractional model, which equates to, “They should come to us because we have what they need.” This unearths a difficult-to-face attitude which too easily views people outside the church as needy, hostile or apathetic, rather than viewing them as people with curiosity, gifts and wisdom. We often view learning as a one-way street (“They need to know God”), thus missing out on what they actually know about what God is doing in our communities. We seek to be **interesting** to outsiders, a laudable goal, but fail to be **interested** in them, thus undergirding their suspicion that we just don’t care about them. This is an upside-down approach to hospitality which says, “We’d love for you to come to our home, but we’ll serve the food we like, and ask you to help pay for it.”

We cling to the approach to stewardship and generosity which emphasizes the need of the church to receive, rather than the need of the giver to give. In an age of deep trust in institutions, like the immediate post World War II age, asking people to ‘support the church’ was synonymous with doing mission because the institution of the church could be trusted to tend to the needs of the community and the world. That deep trust simply doesn’t exist now. We also intimate that people who give their gifts in 12 equal portions on the first of each month are normal, good givers, and we cling to the idea that those under 40 are not generous because they don’t give the way **we** do or support the same things **we** support.

We cling to the sense that the church is a place for **members to belong**, and that church life centers in a building primarily on Sunday. We live in an age in which **participants** want to act and more often presume that the action will occur outside the church.

Deciding to engage in discernment, church leaders are doing nothing more nor less than trying to discover God’s will. This is work that requires courage and vulnerability. It is work in which fools can be really helpful: fools who dream God-sized dreams for the world.

It can’t be done by people who live by the motto, “We just have to get something done now!” It has to be done by people who can exist on the razor’s edge between dreaming and implementation; by people who can say, “God, I don’t know yet what you are trying to say,” while having the confidence that God will speak. The people who do this work must embody two apparently contradictory things: they must be urgent in spirit and non-anxious in presence.

Hard as it is, the work is also great. Discernment is really exploration, and unearths both promising paths and dead-ends, just as it does in expeditions. The deeper we get into the whole story of a congregation, the more possibility there is for discovering the true courage and capacity of a congregation to engage in a ministry any different or more bold than the one it is currently doing. And the deeper we get into the greater story contained in our family album, the Bible, the more we can link the purposes of God found in the Bible with the courage of the modern magi in our congregations and communities who now seek to follow the star to a new reality.



IS DISCERNMENT HARDER NOW THAN IT WAS BEFORE COVID-19?

No area of the church's life has been upended more by the COVID-19 crisis than public worship. Following the frantic rush to convert the church's worship life from the sanctuary to the Internet, clergy and laity alike began to assess what the effect of the conversion had been. Did it come across personally? What would it take to sustain quality? How would it effect the study habits and weekly schedule of the pastor? What about the sacraments? What if people treat online worship like they treat every other consumer product, shopping for what they like?

The deeper the conversation got around the technical questions and the pastoral issues, the more clear it was that many were going to a deeper level, asking "Why do we do what we do? What is truly essential in public worship? What, if anything, can we safely eliminate?"

This deeper conversation is the discernment conversation. It is finally not just a conversation we have amongst ourselves, but with God. Finally we are asking, "God, how are we to give you our deepest praise and thanksgiving? How are we to receive the gifts of presence you are so eager to give us? How are we to understand what you are trying to do in us and how you are trying to equip us to serve the world for which you died?"

Whether discernment is **harder** or not is relevant, but not finally the point. What is clearly true is that discernment takes more **patience and courage**. We are generally so eager to get things solved, to get questions answered, to get our action plan going, that the questions of what is essential are dismissed as navel-gazing.

Patience may be in short supply in many congregations, eager as they will be to find their way back to the old normal, seeing things through their pre-COVID-19 eyes. Courage may also be a precious commodity if the future of some congregations is weakened by death, loss of income, or loss of the will to go on. Discernment, with its focus on the Living God, and on the biblical story of deliverance and resurrection, is what we must practice.

THE DISCERNMENT PROCESS ITSELF

TMF has engaged in the work of discernment at three levels: a) one-to-one conversations with pastors and lay leaders who know that their churches are not as engaged in ministries of transformation as they would like to be, b) one-day workshops called Holy Excavations which help people practice the art of discernment together, and (c) our fully-contracted service called Holy Conversations, a 6-9 month plunge into the courageous work of listening for a calling from God.

Here is what the Holy Conversations (HC) process is and what it does.

A group of 7-9 people plus the pastor are selected to be the designated detectives looking for the clues which will help them discern God's call. They pray together, they gather data and stories, they tell the people of the congregation what they are talking about, they pray, they visit difference makers in the community, they talk to the congregation again, they pray again, and they wrestle with all they have learned and felt. They are led by a facilitator from TMF whose job is to ask good questions so as to help the team do the work only they can do.

The group spends time with two main questions, "Who are we, now?", and "Who is our neighbor, now?" The first question challenges the team to search for the real soul of the congregation, for its DNA. The second question challenges the team to find the heartbeat of a community by talking with whatever set of people the team thinks can teach them the most.

After the search for the DNA of the congregation and the heartbeat of the community are complete, the team looks for vital intersections in the two searches, hoping to hear a calling from God.

Having shared with the congregation what they have talked about after each conversation, the team enunciates the calling they have felt, and brings that to the church's leadership body, along with a set of recommendations for new directions.

Some of the questions a team is challenged to answer are:

If the word 'challenge' can be defined as either the God-appointed future we are attempting to attain, or the impediments on the way to that God-appointed future, what are the challenges facing this church?

What do we know and what do we have? (An inventory of the church's history, its resources, its quirks, its standing in the community, etc.)

What breaks God's heart in this community?

IMPORTANT MILE MARKERS IN THE HOLY CONVERSATIONS EXPERIENCE

Team selection is everything

What helps:

Choosing people who are open minded, spiritually mature, curious, playful, courageous, resilient and flexible

Choosing at least a few who are new to the church because they are the ones who know what the church is like **now**

What hurts:

Choosing the pastor's #1 fan or enemy; those who are people pleasers; those who are judgmental, defensive, or narrow minded; those who don't like ideas; those who wish to do things as they have always been done

Principle findings:

Healthy pastors choose healthy teams. Insecure pastors often choose perpetual complainers in order to 'win them over,' or to keep them from doing any more harm than usual.

If a team member confronts others with a view to shutting them down, the process can become toxic. Sometimes it is necessary to ask a team member to step away from this work.

A great team consists of people who have been recruited with full knowledge of the difficulty and blessing which lies ahead, and aware of the time commitment.

Defining terms is crucial

What helps:

Making certain the team members can name the difference between planning and discernment and envision the possible fruits of discernment before moving into the formal conversations

Encouraging the team to believe in the process when church members anxiously ask, "So, when are we going to see the plan?"

Helping the congregation understand that the team is doing spiritual work powered by prayer and not technical work powered by the problems that need to be solved

What hurts:

Failing to make clear to the congregation what the basic work of the HC team is and why the members have been chosen

Failing to consecrate the team and then provide the prayer support they need

Sometimes learning is more important than action

The choice between deep change and slow death is finally a

SPIRITUAL issue.

The choice between deep change and slow death is finally a spiritual issue. A healthy congregation is one which asks questions rather than making pronouncements. Lots of statements in anxious or unhealthy congregations begin, "We need to..." A healthy congregation asks things like, "How did we get here? What are we clinging to? Who can help us learn what we need to learn?"

Though I always hope that an HC team will formulate a set of bold, do-able recommendations, I deeply believe that the first fruit of discernment work is not the recommendations (and subsequent actions), but the learning that team members are doing about what will be necessary for deep change.

Data can be misused

It has not been unusual in our experience to find church and non-profit leaders latch on to demographic data to help them make decisions. While such data can be remarkably helpful in knowing what the current reality of the church's mission field is, it is mistaken to allow data alone to tell you what to do.

For example, it's important to learn the limits of data. If a church or ministry is located in an area that has an unusually high concentration of 18-30 year olds, and the leaders conclude that it's obvious they should engage in a ministry with those young adults, the ministry will fail miserably if the leaders do not first ask whether they feel a call to work with that age group, whether there is any evidence of the

courage and capacity to do such a ministry well, and whether they are actually interested in the lives of those they seek to reach.

Data provides one level of assessment and learning. But courageous ministry involves learning at several levels, including a thorough spiritual inventory.

Sometimes it is just too soon

It's not unusual when a pastor or non-profit leader arrives at a new appointment for a group of leaders to quickly ask, "What is your vision for us?"

Experience quickly taught us at TMF that moving into a full-blown discernment process in the pastor's first year, no matter how skilled, intuitive or empathetic the pastor is, is simply too soon. This doesn't mean that no discernment can take place in that first year. A pastor might approach the head of the church's leadership group about the possibility of devoting 20-30 minutes of the agenda to a conversation so that the pastor can learn more about the ethos of the congregation and the leaders can examine certain parts of the church's soul without the pressure of having to make a decision or vote on something. This might include questions like:

What are the values that undergird this congregation's life and ministry?

What parts of our church's history will help us as we work on the future?

Where is Christ's presence needed most in our community?

'Experts' may have poisoned the water

One of the factors in how well a congregation or pastor approaches discernment work is whatever history they have with other strategic planning processes and consultants or other church revitalization efforts. If past experiences with strategic planning left a bitter taste in the mouth of the congregation, then it's crucial to have a gathering of all the stakeholders of the mission of the church and talk about the difference between planning and discernment, and to hear any reservations or misgivings people have about an outside facilitator. It's also essential that those stakeholders assess whether a robust discernment process feels like a fit in this particular moment in the church's life. An honest NO is infinitely better than a timid YES.

If almost all of the former church revitalization efforts were top-down from the annual conference or the denomination, then sometimes the team members become skittish, wondering when the TMF facilitator is going to deliver the big wallop ("Here are the results you have to get to be considered successful ..."). If the church has a history of doing strategic planning but not having any element of discernment, they justifiably wonder if the HC work will just produce another three-ring binder that will sit on a shelf somewhere.

In some processes, it takes a lot of cajoling to help people see that the lead objective is to actually have the conversation (sincerely praying for a fruitful result) rather than having a set of meetings that can only be considered successful if there are specified results. No deep change can happen in a congregation without honest, mutually respectful conversation.

The Holy Spirit is unpredictable

The Holy Spirit comforts and disrupts, so it's not unusual in the HC process for a team to experience both the assurance of knowing that they are not alone, and the dis-ease of knowing that they are moving into uncharted waters. Teams are usually comforted the most by realizing that they see things similarly, even if the things they see are disappointing or confusing. They feel disruption when they actually name the challenge of changing the church's culture from "Our ministry is meant to keep things as they have always been" to "We cannot be faithful to the call of God if we do things the way we have always done them."

By far the most incredible moment in the process is when team members see the same things at the same time. They recognize a moment in the church's history when a courageous individual challenged her or his church to risk a major change in attitude. They trust that the insights of people outside the church can profoundly change the way they think about their approach to their community. They realize that a natural disaster presents enormous opportunities in addition to huge challenges. When there is shared insight, the Spirit is free to move and things like the following occur:

A harvest festival which had always been staged to raise money for paying apportionments got re-directed. A courageous leader asked, "What if we give all the proceeds away?" From that moment years ago, this congregation has lived with an almost unrivaled spirit of generosity. Their discernment taught them that the major initiative in children's ministry to which God was leading them was another chapter in the "let's give it all away" story. More than that, it taught them that they could do it.

In a church which had served a Sunday night meal to homeless neighbors for years, a team member asked a neighborhood police captain, "Do you know about our ministry to the homeless?" Little did he expect to hear the police officer to say, "I do, but do you know what happens to those people after you leave the church on Sunday night? And are you actually proud of the fact that you are serving a second generation of the same families on Sunday night?" Though the officer's candor stung at first, being willing to seek the wisdom of the 'outsider' steered this church away from its solitary approach to ministry and toward a collective impact strategy with other churches and non-profits.

A church crippled by a simmering feud over whether traditional or contemporary worship was better was forced to combine services the Sunday after Hurricane Harvey. The team members noted the healing effect of one big family in worship. They asked the HC facilitator, "Can we interrupt the HC process in order to deal with how we should worship?" only to realize that it **wasn't** an interruption. It was an extraordinarily opportune moment for discerning what God was saying to the congregation. The unified congregation started to receive first time visitors and young families in numbers they hadn't seen in 15 years because they were willing to give up the battle over personal preferences in worship.

In each of the three cases named here, there was plenty of planning to be done. There was a building campaign to build a new children's wing. There were a long series of meetings about how to collectively stand alongside homeless neighbors. There was a lot of furniture to move in the chancel! But none of that planning would have been possible had the churches not committed to the hard work of discernment. And the hard is what made it great.