

A Just Peace, Open and Affirming Conference

WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE? - THE CHALLENGING WORK OF GROUP DISCERNMENT

In the early stages of your Search Committee work, you developed a list of skills and gifts you hoped to match with the skills and gifts of ministerial candidates. During recent weeks you have evaluated and prayed about Ministerial Profiles, and you have slowly narrowed the pool of candidates. As you now select candidates for personal interviews, or (later) as you reflect on those interviews and make decisions about hearing candidates preach or inviting them for second interviews, a somewhat different perspective on your decision-making may be helpful—a perspective that will also be valuable as you choose your final candidate.

God has created men and women with an amazing array of emotions, feelings, senses, searching minds, and compassionate hearts. You will now bring all of these aspects of yourselves into a discernment process that will ground you as you make challenging decisions. Within the church, we frequently think of the word “discernment” as an intentional spiritual discipline that usually is part of an individual’s faith journey.

Discernment involves recognizing God’s activity in your own life and attempting to bring your own decisions and desires into harmony with God. Group discernment is also possible, and an Old Testament story may help set a context for your decision-making.

You may have heard sermons about the prophet Elijah and his experience of listening to God’s “still, small voice,” as it is described in the King James Bible. The story begins immediately after Elijah had experienced the “high point” of his prophetic ministry. In a fierce contest with the 900 prophets of the gods Baal and Asherah, Elijah successfully called on his God to send down fire on a water-drenched altar. After all 900 of the “false” prophets were killed, God then responded to Elijah’s appeal and sent desperately needed rain. An enraged Queen Jezebel, furious at the deaths of her prophets, vowed to kill Elijah within 24 hours. Elijah fled into the wilderness, stopping and pleading with God to take his life. An angel urged him to “Get up and eat.” With that nourishment, Elijah continued on for 40 days, eventually hiding in a cave on Mount Horeb.

“Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’ He answered, ‘I have been very zealous for the Lord, (and) . . . I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.’ He said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain . . . for the Lord is about to pass by.’ Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces . . . but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the

Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' . . . Then the Lord said to him, 'Go . . . anoint Jehu son of Nimski as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha . . . as prophet in your place.'"

I Kings 19:9-16

God had not instructed Elijah to go to Mount Horeb. Was Elijah fleeing Queen Jezebel or running from God? Whatever the driving force, the prophet kept running for 40 days before crawling into a cave on Mount Horeb. And God found Elijah in that cave. Having summoned Elijah out of his cave, God then put on an amazing display—one that certainly impacted all of Elijah's senses: a great wind that split mountains and broke rocks into pieces, an earthquake, a fire, and finally "a sound of sheer silence."

Having gotten Elijah's attention, God then sent him back where he came from . . . to continue the work from which he fled. But there would be a change in the land; Elijah was now to anoint a new king over Israel and to anoint a new prophet, Elisha (note the similar name), as Elijah's successor. God may have recognized Elijah's weariness, for God said that Elisha had been selected "as prophet in your place." Elijah had no reason for his self-pity; he was not alone, and his work would have a successor. In fact, history shows us that Elijah founded a prophetic movement that would challenge the kings of Israel again and again, whenever they strayed from God's ways.

It is not always easy for you, members of a Search Committee with different individual backgrounds and unique faith perspectives, to recognize as a group how much God needs and wants to be part of your decision-making process. God is always present, summoning you out of "the cave" when you may want to withdraw from the Holy One. Elijah experienced God in that sound of silence and each of you may experience God in a unique way. You may draw on your intellect to analyze sermon tapes. Or you may experience an "Aha moment" ("an earthquake") in the course of reading a profile or talking with a phone reference for one of your candidates. Another of you may have keen insight and may have unique observations to share about the facial expressions—"the body language" of a candidate—as she/he connected (or did not connect) with your committee. Still others among you may be quietly praying about your major decisions and finding that God is directing you with a "still, small voice."

As you listen carefully to one another, you will begin to see the amazing creativity of God as God's gifts are expressed in the uniqueness of each of you. Inviting God to be an active participant in your deliberations reminds you that group decision-making is not about individual preferences or individual self-interest; rather it is about a group's openness to God's participation in the decision-making in the very midst of those individual differences. Calling on God's wisdom while acknowledging your personal differences and perspectives will also help you understand the importance of consensus; remember that a prayerful decision sometimes cannot be unanimous but will be a choice everyone can and will support.