

Spiritual Discernment Process for Leadership Selection

The selecting of new church leadership has become an arduous task in many churches this day. It is often seen as something that has to be done because our constitution and bylaws say so, and that is best to get it done as quickly as possible. And so many nominating committees see their job as one of filling a slate of nominees rather than a process of discerning the spiritual gifts among church members for leadership. The criteria used often ends up being one of who has been in membership the longest, or who are those among “prominent” families, or who might have connections within the wider community to get things done instead of seeking to discover who God has prepared to provide leadership.

After years as a congregational pastor and being frustrated with the way things have “always” been done, and after reading Charles Olsen’s book, “Transforming Church Boards into Spiritual Leaders” and three years in a spiritual formation/spiritual direction training program, I had a vision for a spiritual discernment process for congregational leadership selection. What follows is a step by step process that asks nominating committees to consider different criteria for calling forth church leadership than the criteria of the world. It is not a magic bullet to solve all problems, but I am convinced that what is offered is a more faithful approach to this task than what is usually used. It is a process that is bathed in prayer, the study of scripture, and a seeking after God’s will to lay a foundation for church leadership.

Outline of the Process:

1. At the first meeting, the chair or designee opens with prayer. The process which will be utilized is reviewed and committee members are asked to commit to following this process. The process begins with the committee praying through six different passages of scripture that tell of God calling forth people into leadership of God’s people using the technique of “Divine Reading” The first passage of scripture is done as a group with the rest done privately over the next week. Committee members are asked to utilize the prayer sheets that follow as their guide. The committee is sent home to pray. The committee does not begin to suggest names for offices until the third meeting. Talking names at this stage will leave God out of this work, so resist the temptation to do so.
2. During the second meeting, committee members share their prayer experiences of the previous week. Take the time to let each committee member share their answers to each day’s text. Each committee member’s sharing is recorded onto a separate sheet of paper or newsprint for future reference. Next the church's Constitution and By-laws are reviewed along with the committee's compiled Prayer worksheets to develop a list of qualities or characteristics for each office of the church. The committee still does not talk names. It is important to not have any preconceived ideas about who would be good for one office or another in order to truly discern who God wants in leadership at this time in the life of the congregation.

3. The committee then adjourns to their homes to pray and seek the Spirit's guidance in identifying people who have those qualities or characteristics. This is done for two to three weeks. At the same time, suggestions are solicited from the church community at large. The congregation needs to be informed of the criteria they are using in seeking potential candidate names.

4. At the third meeting of the committee the members for the first time begin to share names of potential candidates. It is important that no names are suggested before this meeting as that will affect the experience of the prayer times up to this point. When this meeting begins, each member just simply shares names they have come up with during their prayer times. Each name that is suggested is simply listed under the appropriate office title on newsprint or chalk board. No comment about a name is made until all names have been put forward. At this point each name is evaluated as to how well they meet the criteria for each office, and if they do not fit an office they are removed from that list. The remaining names are ranked in order of first choice, second choice and so on. Each committee member is teamed up with a partner and together they are assigned to go and personally ask each candidate to prayerfully consider taking on the leadership role the committee has discerned God is calling forth for them to accept in the coming year. They are also asked to talk with their family about this and that the committee members will contact them in a week for their answer.

5. A week after the initial contact with potential leaders, follow up phone calls are made seeking the person's answer to their call to provide leadership. Affirmative answers places the person's name on the ballot for congregational affirmation at the annual meeting. If the committee receives some no answers to the calls they have issued which result in empty slots on the ballot, the committee needs to discuss if there are other possible people God has equipped to provide leadership in that area or if that area needs to be filled with anyone at this time.

6. The final ballot is then put together and submitted to the church board for their recommendation to the congregation.

Divine Reading (Lectio Divina) Prayer process

Step one: Enter a prayerful and meditative state through deep breathing and a letting go of worldly concerns. One might pray something like, "O God, help me to hear your word for our life together at (name of church). I open myself to your spirit. (a time of silence is observed for a minute or two.)

Step two: Read the text for the day slowly, preferably out loud, but it is not absolutely necessary to do so. As the text is read slowly begin listen for the word or phrase that seems to reach out and grab your attention. After your first reading sit in silence for a minute or two.

Step three: Repeat step two. After a couple of minutes of silence, write the word or phrase that spoke to you without comment. Just sit with the word or phrase. In group settings this is shared verbally.

Step four: Inter again into a prayerful state. Read the text slowly again but this time ask God to reveal to you why He wanted you to pay attention to that word or phrase. Seek also to discover what God wants you to do in response to that phrase. After you finish reading continue to meditate on what you have heard. Be patient in listening so that you fully hear what God wants you to hear. At first, it may feel as if you are making this up or projecting your own thoughts onto God. This is normal. However, as you sit earnestly listening for God's still small voice to speak to you, a word will come that is more than your own thoughts. It will resonate within your spirit as an authentic word from God. It will touch in some way the life and teachings of Jesus. It may be a word of comfort and encouragement, or it may be a word of challenge to an attitude, thought, or behavior that needs to be changed.

Step five: Give thanks to God for the time spent in his presence.

Prayer Journal Guide: Day 1

Theme: Preparing to Discern God's Will

Process:

1. Begin with some progressive relaxation work
2. Read I Kings 19:9-18 in the "Divine Reading" prayer process
3. Prayerfully reflect upon your prayer experience.

Some questions to consider:

What word or phrase seemed to be speaking to you? _____

What do you think God was trying to say to you through this word or phrase?

"What are you doing here?" Is repeated twice in this passage what reaction if any do you have to this question?

Prayer Journal Guide: Day 2

Theme: Preparing to Discern God's Will

Process:

1. Begin with some progressive relaxation work
2. Read I Samuel 3:1-9 in the "Lectio Divina" prayer process
3. Prayerfully reflect upon your prayer experience.

Some questions to consider:

What word or phrase seem to be speaking to you? What did God seem to be saying to you?

How does God speak to us?

Prayer Journal Guide: Day 3

Theme: Preparing to Discern God's Will

Process:

1. Begin with some progressive relaxation work
2. Read Matthew 20:20-28 "Divine Reading" prayer process
3. Prayerfully reflect upon your prayer experience.

Some Questions to consider:

How does the world define leadership?

How does Jesus define leadership?

When looking for leaders what characteristics do we need to see in people?

Prayer Journal Guide: Day 4

Theme: Preparing to Discern God's Will

Process:

1. Begin with some progressive relaxation work
2. Read Acts 6:1-16 in the "Divine Reading" prayer process
3. Prayerfully reflect upon your prayer experience.

Questions to reflect upon:

What word or phrase was speaking to you?

What is God trying to say to you through this passage?

What roles are emerging in the early church?

Why did different roles emerge in the early church?

How were people selected to fill the various roles in the life of the early church?

Prayer Journal Guide: Day 5

Theme: Preparing to Discern God's Will

Process:

1. Begin with some progressive relaxation work
2. Read in the "Lectio Divina" prayer process I Timothy 3:1-7
3. Prayerfully reflect upon your prayer experience.

Some questions to reflect upon:

What word or phrase seems to be speaking to you?

What is God trying to say to you through this passage?

What are various roles in the life of the church that are talked about here?

What are the characteristics people need to exhibit for the various roles?

Are these characteristics realistic?

Prayer Journal Guide: Day 6

Theme: Preparing to Discern God's Will

Process:

1. Begin with some progressive relaxation work
2. Read in the "Lectio Divina" prayer process I Timothy 3:8-13
3. Prayerfully reflect upon your prayer experience.

Some questions to reflect upon:

What word or phrase seems to be speaking to you? _____

What is God trying to say to you through this passage?

What are various roles in the life of the church that are talked about here?

What are the characteristics people need to exhibit for the various roles?

Are these characteristics realistic?

