



MERCY & JUSTICE *Summit*
Going on Mission...

COMMUNAL
DISCERNMENT

**FOR ASSESSING PARISH COMMUNITY PAIN-POINTS
AND MINISTRIES TO RESPOND**



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What is Communal Discernment?

When faced with a question or issue, a faith community begins with its members' relationship with God and God's desire for the community.

As part of the Eucharistic Revival's "Year on Mission," a question for parishes to discern is are its corporal and spiritual works of mercy ministry efforts aligned with its community's most significant and common "pain points"? Put another way, is the parish offering outreach or ministries that address the wounds that many in its community experience that create division with Christ and His Church?

Change is a constant in every life and in every community. What does not change is our God, who is with us, in us, and working through us. Simply put, communal discernment is a consensus-building process to help individuals listen for, or discern, what God desires from the community of participants. The process allows time and space for silent prayer to allow the Spirit to dwell within the meeting place and guide participants. Communal discernment allows everyone's voice to be heard in a thoughtful, respectful manner. Communal discernment is contrary to how "business meetings" are typically conducted and may be unfamiliar to many participants.

This leader's guide is intended to give the background information you need to facilitate communal discernment within your parish.

Why do we have to bother to be prayerfully open to God – or at least try to do so? If we don't, we do not let God guide us. If we are predisposed to one option,

genuine, prayerful discernment is impossible because we cannot be moved or inspired by the Spirit. If we are predisposed to one option, genuine, prayerful discernment is impossible because we cannot be moved or inspired by the Spirit, which we believe dwells in each person. When we are already sure of ourselves, there is no gap left, and no space for God's will to manifest itself.

St Ignatius called this posture of openness "holy indifference." Compared to traditional decision-making, communal discernment factors in our hope, our desire to be led by the will of God. In decision-making, we are likely to ask questions like, "Which is the better option?" or "What do I want?" In discernment, the question is more likely to be, "What does God desire for us, for our children, and for our parish?"

Communal discernment begins with this premise: **We do not advocate solutions or promote options; we begin by prayerfully seeking wisdom together.** This attitude of openness should not be mistaken for apathy or lack of interest. Rather, this is a posture of freedom. It means approaching everything with fresh eyes, confident that God is there. At its core, this prayer practice is about finding God in all things, including all our decisions.

Similar to some pastoral council discernment tools and the Catholic-centric "Called and Gifted" program, this resource is adapted from Practice of Discernment, Spiritual Formation Program of the Grace Institute, luther.edu/graceinstitute, Aug. 2013, and used with the permission of the Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops.

COME
Holy Spirit



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Communal Discernment - Leader's Guide

To prepare yourself to guide the discernment process, consider the following:

Review the communal discernment guidelines and suggestions. Become familiar with the process, get a sense of the flow, learn where the spaces are within the process for the Spirit to enter, and where participants can share and grow together. Allow 60-90 minutes for the process.

Familiarize yourself with the question or concern the group is seeking to discern. In this instance, you are considering:

What are the most significant and common pain-points or wounds within our parish boundary community that create division from Christ and His Church? Does our parish have ministries or an outreach to address these pain points? What corporal or spiritual works of mercy can we do to reach or invite the vulnerable and marginalized within our parish boundary?

Invite people to participate in the discernment process. They should be people able to make decisions and ensure the discerned action plan will be implemented.

Gather data about your parish relevant to the question.

- Understand the demographics of your parish community – age (generally an aging community or many children?), income level, marital status, etc. The Archdiocesan Stewardship and Development Office has access to Mission Insights, a community demographics software tool. If your parish is not already using this

program, contact their office to gain access.

- What are some of the institutions, organizations, or significant characteristics within your parish boundaries?
 - Schools
 - Universities
 - Major employers
 - Prisons/jails
 - Military bases
 - Rehab centers
 - Government offices
 - Planned Parenthood facilities
 - “Adult” stores and clubs
 - Blighted neighborhoods
 - Gangs
 - Pollution
 - Homelessness
 - “PayDay” lenders
 - Others?
- What are the pain points that are often associated with these demographics or institutions? An example might be, if your community population is mostly elderly, loneliness might be a significant pain point. What community issues keep you up at night? What common issues does the pastor continue to hear in confession or what issues does the school principal and/or counselor often see or hear that are affecting its school families?
- Make an updated list of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy ministries your parish has. What needs do these ministries address? What fruit is coming from the ministries?

Understand the leader's role. The leader or facilitator of communal discernment has two seemingly opposing tasks: to help the group make room for the Spirit, and to monitor the timing of the various agenda items. While these tasks may appear at odds, a skillful



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facilitator can help make room for the Spirit by assuring those who are more time-focused that they can let go of this awareness because the facilitator is guiding the group through the process.

Understand communal discernment is not a “race to a decision.” Consensus differs from other forms of group decision-making in that action is not determined by a motion, a second, and a vote. Rather, the group seeks to agree upon the action by including the wisdom of everyone in the group. You’ll read more about consensus within this guide.

Consider discussing the process first.

Putting it Into Practice

1. Begin with a welcome and introductions. Explain that the group will practice a prayerful process to help determine a parish corporal and spiritual works of mercy plan using a discernment process.

2. Dwell in the Word (about 10 minutes). Suggested Scripture readings:

“If there is any encouragement in Christ, any solace in love, any participation in the Spirit, any compassion and mercy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing. Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but also everyone for those of others.”

Philippians 2:1-11

Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph,

son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” Matthew 1:20-21

3. Sharing time (about 15-20 minutes) – Invite sharing about what happened in the prayer time.

4. Listen to the presentation and frame the question for communal discernment (about 15 minutes) –

Encourage participants to listen to the presentation with open minds and hearts, and not to “formulate rebuttals” while listening. Remind participants that if they are too busy thinking about their response, they cannot hear what’s being presented. Share information about your parish’s current ministries, community demographics, local institutions, etc.

5. Discern God’s desire for you and your community (minimum of 20 minutes) – Focus the group on the main question being discerned. Ask, what can our parish do in response?

- Begin with several minutes of prayerful silence. As the discussion begins, listen to the wisdom of everyone in the group. Don’t immediately lean toward one option over the other. Take a step back to detach yourself from anything that would color your decision prematurely.
- Rely on God; be open, prayerful and confident we can seek God’s will for us and strive to achieve consensus on the question. Check in with participants in the group; be sure all have been given the opportunity to be heard.

6. Determine if there is consensus – Share what is noticed; discuss ideas and determine where consensus might be emerging. Test if there is



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consensus; if there is not, pause and repeat step 4.

Explain that consensus is the hoped-for outcome. The goal of this prayerful process is to achieve consensus on the question. Consensus does not necessarily mean everyone is in full agreement with the proposal. Rather, the question might be, "Is this proposal something you can live with?" People who indicate that, while they may not be in full agreement, they can live with the proposal are "standing aside" for the sake of achieving consensus. Those who feel they cannot live with the proposal can block it.

7. Conclusion (about 5 min) - End with a brief prayer of thanksgiving. If there is no consensus, the leader may suggest adjourning and establishing a date to continue the communal discernment process. If there is consensus, the decisions made will determine next steps.

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