

EKG SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him”—

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny.

“For who has known the mind of the Lord
so as to instruct him?”

But we have the mind of Christ (I Corinthians 2:1-16)

Oasis Outreach in Akron, Ohio is a Synodically Authorized Worshiping Community (SAWC) of the Northeastern Ohio Synod (NEOS) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). Oasis has always stopped to “Pause, Pray and Proceed,” a catchphrase coined to allow people to ease out of their own agendas and enter into the movement of God by simply pausing to check in with God before moving forward in any direction. This pausing and praying before proceeding slows down knee-jerk reactions and ego centered goal setting.

Oasis staff, participants and collaborators use an expanded discernment process called “EKG,” where each person gathers to share with each other the status of three check-in points: “Energy,” “Know,” and “Go.” This EKG spiritual discernment process involves individual responses to three questions: (1) “Where do you sense *energy*?”, (2) “What do you *know* for sure at this present moment?” and (3) “What do you see as a possible way to *go*?” EKG is an apt acronym because the medical EKG is a procedure that gathers information from different areas of the heart by placing electrodes on the chest, arms and legs to measure electrical impulses of the heart at any given time. Similarly, the EKG discernment process is a helpful diagnostic tool because it allows people to check in with the rhythm of grace within the ministry to determine the status of each participant’s awareness of the energy of God within the collective system.

By being aware that every idea, all movement forward, and sometimes backward in ministry is generated by the energy and movement of God as discerned through the energy and movement of the staff and participants, churches can continually connect to what God is already doing and then simply make the next natural move. Without a spiritual discernment process involving everyone’s input, one leader can lead down a path that either no one else is on or few comprehend. Because of the creative and Spirit-filled action of God in our world, grace allows new things to unfold. People in relationship with God and each other can tap into God’s movement and gain strength to take steps.

God is calling us to enter into God’s promises and to receive the Holy Spirit to help us discern our way. The waters of holy change are propelled by a Spirit-led movement. Episcopal priest, Cynthia Bourgeault, identifies the path of spiritual discernment by indicating that it is a way to be led through a different kind of perceptivity.

Saint Paul talked about this other kind of perceptivity with the term “faith” (“Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”), but the word “faith” is itself often misunderstood by the linear mind. What it really designates is not a leaping into the dark (as so often misconstrued) but a subtle *seeing* in the dark, a kind of

spiritual night vision that allows one to see with inner certainty that the elusive golden thread glimpsed from within actually does lead somewhere.”¹

Spiritual discernment is seeking in the dark what you are seeing in the dark, but waiting for someone else to see it too before you make a move. Together we can see the next steps forward if we use the tools of spiritual discernment together.

We can respond to the Holy Spirit speaking through our context. To consider what God may be calling us to do requires a clearly defined way to discern where the energy of the Spirit is leading. At Oasis we have developed a three-step process of discernment. We gather in small groups of staff, participants, and collaborators throughout each week to ask the group to respond to three questions:

Where do we sense the **ENERGY** of God in our lives and ministry?
What is one new thing that we **KNOW** for sure?
What is a possible way to **GO**?

Sometimes there is no energy around anything, and we simply rest and pray or sit in silence. Usually at least one person will have some energy around something. Energy creates enthusiasm. Perhaps we can know one small thing for sure and if so, we wait to see how that resonates with the group. Then if the action lines up with the Word of God through Jesus Christ, we take the step and watch what happens. Steps are not always forward. We often back up and try again. However, before we do anything, we continually ask these three questions related to Energy, Know and Go.

In difficult times, like in the aftermath of a murder next door at Oasis in Akron, Ohio, no one present felt energized enough to know anything for sure, or to move forward in any way. But slowly the energy would show up around certain aspects of the ministry like, when we realized that there was energy around the young girls mentoring group. The high school participants were gaining strength to graduate because they had a safe place to gather weekly together. The last four places they had gathered had asked them to leave. We knew then to take a step forward to support them by offering them expanded space and freedom. We

¹ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer: Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2016), 54.

assured them that they could have a space with us so they could gain strength to follow through on their life plans.

Through the EKG discernment process, our shared leadership has developed courage born through the tensions, struggles, and pain of a ministry, which has experienced a murder next door, several break-ins, violence, and threats of violence to staff members and our facility, and the death of four young adults due to gun violence. We have found that a helpful way to spiritually discern is to connect with God and each other by asking three EKG questions.

- Where do we sense the **ENERGY** of God in our lives and ministry?
- What is one new thing that we **KNOW** for sure?
- What is a possible way to **GO**?

1. Where do I feel ENERGY?

. . . it is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me (Colossians 1:28-29).

Asking any of the following questions can help track the ENERGY of God in us.

- Are you excited about anything at this time?
- Have you seen anything recently that gives you hope?
- Where have you had a chance to be yourself?
- Are you feeling any new or renewed strength?
- What have you experienced that you are good at or that you like to do?
- What are you doing that is fun?
- What activities that you are participating in are flowing?
- Where have you made a connection (in your family, the church or in the community)?
- Are you feeling very little energy or not feeling any energy at all?
- What are you feeling (fear, anger sadness, etc.)?
- How have you changed?
- What does God's word have to say about what you are energized for or how you have changed?

Each participant can be invited to respond to one of the questions. Listen to as many participants as possible and as time allows. Usually at least one person will have some energy

around something. When people of God understand that the energy inside is inspired by God, we can become aware of where God is leading us. God is calling us to become more aware of the energy of the Holy Spirit to help us discern our way.

2. What do you KNOW for sure?

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the testimony of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:1-2).

When discerning God's will, whatever we think we know for sure will reflect God's promises made manifest through Jesus Christ. Asking any of the following questions can help reveal what we know for sure at any given time.

- Are you able to know anything for sure currently?
- Can you say anything for certain at this moment in time?
- Are you not able to say that you know anything for sure at this time?
- Does what you are thinking line up with the Word of God through the action of Jesus Christ including:
 - God's loving us
 - Our loving God
 - Our loving neighbor

Sometimes the only things we can know for sure are God's promises. We can always rest in those promises. If we are aware that we are participating in the Holy Spirit, in the middle of each decision is often a death and resurrection – something will change or something new will be discovered.

3. What is a possible way to GO?

Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness
because of my enemies; make your way straight before me (Psalm 5:8).

. . . as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him – these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit: for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Asking any of the following questions can help convey a next natural step to go forward (or back).

- Where can our strengths and our passions meet with a need in our church and community?
- Do we know what God might be calling us to do?
- Are we presently on track?
- Are we energized enough and certain enough that we are comfortable enough to take a step forward to try something else or something new?
- Are we thinking that we may need to go backwards, slow down, or stop something?
- What might be the next, tiny step forward? backwards?

If a step forward is indicated, we can take the small step and watch what happens. Steps are not always forward. We often back up and try again. People of God can develop courage born through the tension, struggle, and pain of their lives, ministries, and communities.

When we experience drama and trauma of our lives, including murders, break-ins, violence, threats of violence to staff, our facilities, our neighborhoods, cities and planet, we can still discern what God is calling us to do. Pausing to measure the health of any system (marriage, family, job, church, city, planet) can help to catch on to God's holy spirit in the flow of the universe (God's will on earth as it is in heaven). As we consider of all the things we could do or say, what would God have us do or say.

Conclusion

In times of uncertainty and change, people in relationship with God and each other can tap into God's energy, promises, and grace to gain strength to take steps together. We can find ways through the EKG process to discern what God may be communicating. When people who gather together have spent time pausing and praying, God can access them more easily. More holy information is available. Everyone's experiences and revelations can contribute to the bigger picture that is evolving.

Oasis practices the EKG Discernment Process (Energy, Know, Go), but any way people have of pausing to check in with God and each other to try to determine what God is up to is central to shared leadership and to movement in the kingdom of God. The main pause of sitting still when things are not going well, serves as a catalytic space of potential energy to observe and

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understand the movement of death toward resurrection in our contexts. Something will change or something new will be discovered.

Jesus said, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me, yet not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

Jesus said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me, yet not what I want but what you want” (Mark 14:36).

Transformation of lives and ministries can be accomplished by Christ in us. Being aware of the theology of the cross, we can connect to the waves of what God is doing in the context of each specific time and space and then simply make the next move that lines up with God’s will on earth as it is in heaven.

So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being! (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Word of God Markers for Participation in the EKG Process

Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:19-20).

‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord you God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:29-31).

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:36-40).

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But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii,^{kd} gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:29-37).

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations. Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven (Matthew 18:18).

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them,

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'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me'
(Matthew 25:31-45).

So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look,
new things have come into being! (2 Corinthians 5:17).