

Quaker Life
July/August 2000

Maturing in Christ Corporate Spiritual Discernment as a School of the Spirit

By Margaret Benefiel

The pastoral search committee at Smithtown Friends Meeting finds itself polarized, with some members favoring one candidate and others favoring another. The members of the search committee decide to seek God together, earnestly praying for God's guidance and asking God which is the right candidate to choose. After three more meetings and much prayer in between, the committee remains divided. Disappointed and angry, and feeling the pressure of time, the committee rushes to a decision. Half of the committee feels disregarded and the whole committee feels betrayed by God. Why did things turn out this way? Why did God not answer their earnest prayers?

What is going on here? If everyone on the search committee earnestly sought God, why did God not show them which candidate to choose? Were some members not listening to God? Were some stubborn? Perhaps, but perhaps something entirely different was occurring.

In the prayer life of an individual, prayer develops in different ways at different times. Early in the Christian life, a person often experiences abundant blessings from God, with God answering every prayer he prays. Later, prayer is not so easy. The Christian finds herself bumping into closed doors, or feeling like her prayers don't make it past the ceiling. Has she lost her touch? Is she doing something wrong? Not necessarily. Maturing in Christ includes learning the subtleties of prayer and of relationship with God. As spiritual babes, we cry out to God and God answers, letting us know that our cries are heard and that we can count on God. As we grow out of spiritual infancy we discover that God invites us to learn new lessons. We learn to wait. We learn that sometimes we pray for one thing and God, translating our prayers into what we most need, gives us another. We learn to listen to God. We learn to let God shape our prayers. We experience the dark night of the soul, when God seems to have abandoned us. We learn to desire God for Godself and not for the gifts God gives.

Just as the individual discovers many twists and turns in the journey toward God, so the committee or Friends meeting or other corporate body discovers similar twists and turns. We live in an individualistic culture, and we Friends have absorbed much of that individualism. Thus, we experiment with corporateness tentatively and suspiciously, if at all. Many of our Friends meetings and committees are still spiritual babes when it comes to corporate prayer and discernment, even though these same bodies may contain spiritually mature individuals. When we gather corporately to make a decision and turn to God in prayer, we expect God to answer our prayers in the way we frame them and according to our timetable. Many times, we get the

answers we expect, as God is so delighted that we want to listen, and so delighted that we are praying on our committees at all, and so much wanting us to know that we have been heard and responded to compassionately, that God is happy to give us our answers in a form we can recognize. Sometimes, however, we do not receive the answers we expect. Rather than assume that our experiment with corporate discernment has failed, or that God has betrayed us, or that there must be some people who have not been listening to God, might we have eyes to see another explanation? Perhaps God is inviting us to deepen in prayer corporately. Perhaps God is inviting us out of corporate spiritual infancy into corporate maturity.

Returning to the example above, notice that the committee expected God to answer the question in the way they had framed it: which of the two candidates was God's choice for the position? While God does sometimes answer in the way we expect, sometimes God has something else entirely for us. Perhaps God knew that a third person would be better for the job. Or that Smithtown Friends Meeting needed an interim pastor for a year before it called a long-term pastor. Or that either of the two candidates the search committee had in mind would be fine, but that the committee had some important work to do in learning to respect and trust one another, and in learning to listen to God together, before any choice would be a good one. Or any of a number of other possibilities. Just as in our individual prayer lives when we do not receive the answers we expect or want and we must seek the deeper invitation from God, so it is in our corporate prayer and discernment. Just as in our individual prayer lives when we feel frustrated and betrayed by God and we must come to God in our frustration and anger and ask God to meet us where we are, so it is in our corporate prayer and discernment.

How might the Smithtown pastoral search committee have trusted that God knew their needs and understood their timetable? How might they have trusted God to reshape their agenda? Could they have believed that God knew their needs better than they did, and that God's timing in meeting those needs was better than their timing? Might they have considered the points of conflict between the two groups on the search committee, considered the different values those perspectives represented, and brought those different values to God in prayer? Might they have asked God whether they were asking the right question? What would it have taken for the members of the search committee to name their fears of noticing and naming conflicting values in their midst, their fears about trusting God and trusting one another, their fears about letting go of control of the timetable and the process?

When a group lets go of its agenda and seeks God's agenda, any of a number of things might happen. In the case of Smithtown, consider the following possible scenario. After the second meeting of not coming to unity, the group decides to take a hard look at itself, naming the conflicting values represented by the two groups. One group favors the older, more experienced pastoral candidate, who would bring solid preaching, support a traditional worship service, and work well with the older, long-time members of the meeting. The other group favors the younger, well-qualified though less experienced candidate, who would bring innovative worship, encourage the ministry of all members, and reach out to newcomers and younger members. They recognize that these conflicting values represent a split in the meeting as a whole, and that they have been at the root of many a division in the meeting. Furthermore, they recognize that they have always looked to pastoral leadership to resolve their conflicts, seeking a pastor who would be all things to all people. No pastor in their history has filled the bill. They have tended to blame

their pastors for not providing the answer to their problems. They decide instead to seek God in prayer, humbly naming their conflicting values and asking for God's guidance. Someone speaks out of the silence, suggesting that they consider the good in the opposing point of view. People speak one by one, naming the good they see in the values they have opposed, confessing their hardheartedness in closing out others. After two more meetings of continuing to seek God together in prayer, a new solution emerges. They call an interim pastor who specializes in helping meetings with conflicts, and they set aside the next year as a time to address the different values in their midst, seeking God's guidance for them as a faith community. They recognize that they need to do their own foundational work and name and own their values and direction; they cannot expect a new pastor to do that work for them. They will ask the interim to help facilitate that process.

Through seeking God's deeper invitation through the impasse, the Smithtown pastoral search committee reached a solution no one would have imagined, a solution which serves the meeting far better in the long run than either of the two options the committee initially framed. Even more importantly, the committee has learned some things together about corporate prayer and discernment:

- 1) that God can be trusted to work in corporate discernment,
- 2) that God cares deeply about them as a corporate body and can be counted on to walk with them through their work together,
- 3) that they can trust one another to listen to God together and move through tough issues to a place of deeper love and respect and listening, as well as to a solution. They now possess a stronger foundation for their future work together as a meeting. They have moved out of corporate spiritual infancy and begun the journey toward maturity.