

**“the ability to  
listen to God  
as a Christian  
community  
is crucial to the  
Christ-centred,  
mission-shaped  
church”**



**open** TO  
**GOD**

RESOURCES FOR DECISION-MAKING IN CHURCH COMMUNITIES

**Navigation**

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- A short history
- Is it an issue?
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# Open to God: a user's guide

## Finding your way around...

### Symbols

Here's a list of the various symbols we've used to help you find the different sections and resources within *Open to God*.



Activities, exercises or group work.



This symbol beside the text lets you know that there's an accompanying separate PDF document on the disk. It may be a handout, form, activity sheet or booklet, and will be formatted for easy printing and copying.



A list of instructions or steps to follow.



A Bible study or message

## Navigating the PDF

We've included a number of things to help you find your way around *Open to God* when viewing it as a PDF..

### The navigation bar

This appears on every page. Clicking on any item will take you to the relevant section.

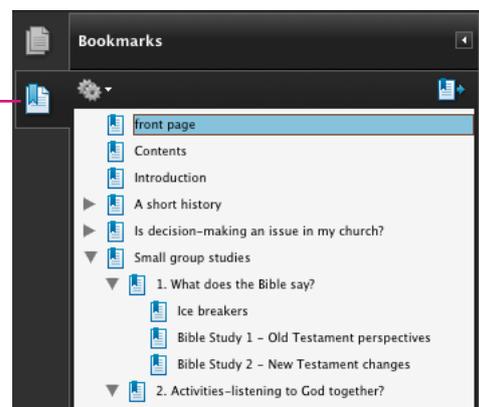
### The Contents page

All headings and sub-headings are hyperlinked. Clicking on any item will take you to the relevant section.

### Adobe Reader bookmarks

click on the Bookmarks icon

Open the Bookmarks panel by clicking on the Bookmarks icon at the top left corner of the window (or going to the View menu and selecting Navigation Panels/Bookmarks). The Bookmarks panel contains a detailed hyperlinked summary of the complete *Open to God* document. This panel can be resized - and the text scaled - for easier viewing on any monitor. See Adobe Reader Help for more information. You can download the latest version of Adobe Reader [here](#).



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## INTRODUCTION

In 2004 the Regional Ministers of the Baptist Union of Victoria compiled a resource entitled Fit 4 Life which looked at ways churches could move towards more healthy practices. We put this together as a response to issues we were seeing in the churches.

Open to God has arisen in a similar fashion. As we have travelled around churches, we have experienced a great amount of unease surrounding both church meetings and, more generally, the way we make decisions in church life.

- In general, church meetings are poorly attended and people readily offer the opinion that they are boring or an exercise in rubber-stamping decisions made elsewhere.
- Increasingly foundational decisions about church direction are being left to senior pastors, leadership groups and staff teams.
- In many church meetings - and in many leadership and ministry group meetings - we engage in an informal style of debate, in which the “contest of ideas” is trusted to guide us to the right decision. Mostly, this is considered and respectful. But it still means that most meetings are dominated by the articulate, persistent and powerful people, who bring their substantial influence to the task of winning the argument for their own view.

**“the ability to listen to God as a Christian community... is crucial”**

- At their worst, and especially when a controversial issue is up for debate, passionate rhetoric, inflammatory speeches, the forming of factions and stacking of meetings, temper tantrums and abuse, stalling tactics and biased chairing do substantial damage to the community.
- In all of this, we pay lip service to the importance of discovering ‘the mind of Christ’ in our midst, but there is often an ignorance about how we might actually do that in practice.

For all these reasons and more, we felt that we needed to explore this vital subject of collective discernment, and offer some ideas and resources to help recover something at the core of our identity as Baptist churches.

We believe that the ability to listen to God as a Christian community and make healthy Spirit-led decisions together, is crucial in the foundation of a Christ-centered, mission-shaped church.

*Rev Grant Stewart, Rev Stephen Venz, Rev Anne Wilkinson-Hayes and Rev Andrew Woff*

The Regional Ministers  
Suumer 2009

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# A SHORT HISTORY

## WE MUST STOP MEETING LIKE THIS...



**A**MONG the inspirational pioneers of the Reformation, Baptists were among the non-conformist congregations who sought to be open to God together. They longed to respond to the Spirit's leading, as understood by the local congregation, as they gathered around the word of God. They did not want to be told what to do by Bishops who were focused on wider institutional concerns.

The Church of the time was run as one mega-institution, where a policy of one-size-fits-all dominated. As people began to have access to the Scriptures, they began to question whether or not this was a biblical approach. It seemed that there was a more local and customised approach to life and ministry in the Bible, which varied from place to place as the Spirit led.

The early reformers wanted the freedom to worship without being constrained by the set orders of the Prayer book, and to reinstitute the baptism of believers. However one of the main reasons our Baptist forbears endured torture and persecution was for the right to have a church meeting where local believers could discern the mind of Christ in accordance with scriptures.

For these pioneers of Baptist Church life, the church meeting was not intended to be a business meeting, where we manage the institution of the church. It was primarily about gathering to hear the Word of God for a specific community at a specific time.

### What happened to the early intentions?

It was only later that Baptist churches began to use the church meeting for business. In 1876 US Army Major Henry Martyn Robert published Robert's Rules of Order. The author's interest in parliamentary procedure began in 1863 when he was chosen to preside over a church meeting and, although he accepted the task, felt that he did not have the necessary knowledge of proper procedure.

**“from being places of listening... they became places of debate”**

He thus developed a set of guidelines based on parliamentary and military order adapted for voluntary societies. This has had a major impact on the nature of church meetings. From being places of listening and inclusive discernment, they quickly became places of debate, rhetoric and the effective exclusion, or disempowering, of those less articulate or less able to understand the procedures of debate.

### Church Meeting becomes Business Meeting

As a result, our understanding of 'congregational government' moved from all people sharing in the process of discerning God's will to all people being able to share in the decision-making process of church management.

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Using the word ‘government’ has pushed us in an unwanted direction. It focuses us upon ‘business’ and decisions about the running of the organisation. However, it is clearly not possible for every member to have a say on every decision. It is unsustainable to expect leaders to bring all the decisions about governing a church community to the members.

Under this weight, the Church Meeting has groaned with a variety of complications:

- How can a large church gather into one space and deal with matters of church management?
- How can quick decisions be made as new opportunities present themselves requiring efficient response when the church meeting happens each quarter and even special meetings require two weeks notice?
- How realistic is it for church members to wade through detailed technical information related to complex property, legal or insurance issues?
- How can we avoid the impression that the Church Meeting is simply rubber stamping decisions made elsewhere and cleverly marketed to the members?
- How can we prevent the climate of suspicion when the church meeting operates like a “house of review” to make sure that the pastors or leadership group don’t “get away with anything”, causing frustration for pastors, leaders and members alike?
- How do we make meetings a valuable - and even inspirational - experience for busy people who have multiple demands on their time?

**Is there an alternative?**

Yes! We believe there is an alternative! If the purpose of our church meeting is not about management, but about discerning God’s will and direction for the church, then we can enter new territory.

What follows is a variety of ideas and approaches to help church communities come together for the purpose of listening to God and discovering the will of God for our life together. This is, we contend, the original basis of congregational government, and is a much more sustainable and inspiring way of conducting “church meetings”.

We will be using the term ‘Church Meeting’ to indicate the formal, constituted decision-making gathering in a congregational church, and ‘church meeting’ to indicate any time when we come together as a body in church life. It is our contention that there can be a narrowing distinction between these two types of meeting. We are seeking to liberate our inherited formal structures to be more open to the movement of God’s spirit for this time and place.

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## IS DECISION-MAKING AN ISSUE IN MY CHURCH?



This is a simple diagnostic tool which may help identify the need for this resource.

### Introduction

“If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!” is a well-known saying, expressing a reluctance to interfere with what is already functional. So perhaps, before trying to offer some new pathways for congregational decision-making and discernment, it would be good to clarify whether this is actually an issue requiring reflection in your church.

- If it’s not, then you would be best advised to put this resource to one side and thank God for the health of your church community.
- If it is, this exercise might help you to clarify what your church most needs from this resource.

### You will need...



A copy of the two page handout ‘**A quick health check**’ and a pen for everyone in your group. *The handout material is on pages 9 and 10 here. It is also formatted for easier printing in a separate PDF on the disk: [a quick health check.pdf](#)*

### Time required

About 20 minutes for each person to work through the worksheet, then about 30 minutes for a general discussion.

### The process



1. Distribute the worksheet and a pen to every member of your group and give them sufficient time to respond to all 24 statements. If someone has no knowledge of an issue, invite them to tick the “sometimes” box.
2. When everyone is finished, invite all members of the group to pass their worksheet on to someone else (if sitting in a circle, you may want to invite everyone to pass the worksheet to the person on their left).
3. On the worksheet they now have, invite everyone to apportion points according to the scoring system. You may like to go through the questions together, making it clear how many points are recorded for each response.



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*For questions 1 to 12, award your answers points on the following basis:*

|           |          |
|-----------|----------|
| Always    | 4 points |
| Usually   | 3 points |
| Sometimes | 2 points |
| Rarely    | 1 point  |
| Never     | 0 points |

*For questions 13 to 24, award your answers points on the following basis:*

|           |          |
|-----------|----------|
| Always    | 0 points |
| Usually   | 1 point  |
| Sometimes | 2 points |
| Rarely    | 3 points |
| Never     | 4 points |

- Once all the points have been recorded for each response and the total has been added and recorded, invite everyone to return the worksheet to the person from whom it was received.
- At this point, the leader of the process may wish to record all the individual numbers on a piece of butchers paper, overhead transparency or computer with digital projection.
- Ask the group to read the section *Suggestions for further action* on the handout
- Work out together in which category or categories most totals fall.
- Ask the group if they think that the suggestion for further action indicated by this exercise seems fair.
- Ask the group if there are any other comments they would like to make about the results of this exercise.
- Ask the group what they think the next step should be.

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# A QUICK HEALTH CHECK ON DECISION-MAKING IN YOUR CHURCH

|   | always                   | usually                  | sometimes                | rarely                   | never                    | points |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------|
| 1. Our church meetings are well attended, with over half the congregation participating   | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 2. Church meetings are inspiring occasions, where people leave with a sense of having been in the presence of God   | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 3. Priority is given at church meetings to the major issues of vision, direction, mission, leadership and being open to the guidance of God   | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 4. Priority is given at church meetings to worship and prayer   | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 5. Dissenting voices, quiet people, and creative possibilities from “out of the box” are given plenty of space in our decision-making   | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 6. When our church gathers to make decisions, we go beyond “good ideas” to genuinely seek what God is saying to us  | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 7. Our leadership group spends plenty of time praying, playing and eating together in order to form a strong sense of communal trust and openness   | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 8. Differences of opinion are generally resolved by waiting and listening, rather than premature voting   | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 9. There is a healthy balance of trust and accountability allowing pastor(s), leadership team and ministry groups to do the task they are called to do without micro-managing from the church meeting | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 10. Ministry groups feel supported and empowered in exercising their ministry   | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 11. Decision-making processes in our church help people to learn to discern God’s leading and to grow in their spiritual lives  | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 12. We creatively use silence in our meetings to enable us to be still and listen to God together   | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 13. Church meetings are generally dominated by the opinions of less than 5 people   | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 14. People go home from church meetings feeling hurt, disillusioned or that their opinion does not count  | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 15. Church meetings seem to be for the rubber-stamping of decisions made elsewhere  | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 16. Prayer is offered at the beginning and end of church meetings but nowhere in-between  | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 17. Diverse or conflicted opinion tends to be silenced, or at least avoided   | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 18. We have experiences of temper tantrums, lobbying, stacked meetings, biased chairing, and inflammatory speeches at church meetings   | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 19. Meetings of leaders and ministry groups tend to become a contest of individual ideas, rather than a respectful listening to one another to seek God’s leading                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 20. Leadership group meeting agendas are long and meetings routinely go late into the night   | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 21. New people appointed to our church’s leadership group tend to lose motivation quickly   | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 22. Our pastor or pastors always seem busy with meetings and organisational tasks   | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 23. It’s hard to get, or to keep, leaders for our ministry groups   | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |
| 24. In our decision-making processes, people find it hard to relinquish pre-determined agendas, hurts or judgements from the past   | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____  |

**POINTS TOTAL** \_\_\_\_\_



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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER ACTION

This exercise is a quick health check on your church's decision-making style as you understand it.

0-30 points

In your understanding, your church is experiencing considerable distress around its decision-making processes and some work is urgently required. Open to God has been devised specifically for your situation. You are encouraged to consult with your regional minister and discuss with them how to proceed.

31-50 points

In your understanding, there are some significant concerns about your church's decision-making style. An investment in working through Open to God could bring significant benefits to your church community. Chapters 4-5 will provide you with the spiritual context for decision-making processes and Chapters 6-8 will give a lot of alternative practical ideas that you can experiment with.

51-70 points

In your understanding, there are a lot of healthy things about your church's decision-making approach. You may wish to review the questions above for which you scored 2 points or below, and consider whether you can make some improvements. You may find that chapters 6-8 provide some additional helpful ideas in further developing and diversifying your church's decision-making.

71-96 points

In your understanding, yours is a healthy and mature congregation which functions very well together and centres its discernment on God. Unless someone in your church is a discernment enthusiast (like us!), you may be best advised to leave Open to God on your shelf... or better still, pass it on to another church that may benefit from it. You'd be much better off using your strength in developing your church's mission. And give thanks to God for God's grace at work in your church's life.

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# SMALL GROUP STUDIES

## 1. WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT DISCERNING GOD'S WILL?

*These studies are designed to give a number of insights into biblical patterns of discovering God's will as a community. A selection of short ice-breaker activities and main studies are offered for each topic. You will need to be selective and choose material that you think will interest and stretch your group.*



*Having lost their parents in the 1994 genocide, these Rwandan kids make decisions for each other's welfare in a community of child-headed households.*

Ice breakers – choose one (allow 15 mins)

### ICE BREAKER 1. Unlikely vehicles

1. Who is God most likely to call to reveal the divine will to the people? Think of as many biblical examples of the following as you can. (You can probably put some in several categories).
  - a child
  - a servant/maid
  - a shepherd
  - a senior citizen
  - a king
  - a priest
  - a woman
  - a prisoner
  - a murderer
2. What does this tell us about who we look to in order to listen to God?
3. Who do we tend to look to?



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## ICE BREAKER 2. Different methods

1. Divide the following verses amongst your group and ask them to identify the method of discernment, or finding God's will, that is being used in each one (there may be more than one method).
  - Genesis 6:11-14 & 7:1
  - Genesis 18:1-2 & 10
  - Exodus 3:1-10
  - Judges 6: 36-40
  - 1 Samuel 3:8 -10
  - 2 Samuel 12:1-7
  - Matt. 1:18-21
  - Luke 6:12-13
  - Acts 1:21-26
  - Acts 5:1-6 & 11
  - Acts 6:1-7
  - Acts 10:9-23
  - Acts 13:1-3
  - Acts 15:1-21
  - Acts 16:6-10

3. What surprises the group?
4. What do we learn about the ways God's people have found God's will?

## ICE BREAKER 3. Some definitions

1. What do we mean by discernment? Ask the group to provide some definitions, and then compare them with those below...

*To discern means...*

- to separate or distinguish (from the Latin *discernere*)
- to test in crisis or to distinguish good and evil (from the Greek *diakrisis*)
- to find the authentic and valuable and to recognize the counterfeit (like biting a coin to see if it is gold)
- to see to the heart of the matter with spiritual eyes; from God's vantage point, to see beneath the surface of events, through illusions within human systems, and beyond the immediate and transient
- to locate the immediate and particular within a vision of the broad and distant landscape (to see the trees in the forest)
- to possess immediate and direct insight.

Morris and Olsen (*Discerning God's Will Together*, Upper Room Books, Nashville, 1997)

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## Prayer

*As we look for what to do,  
 May the strong hand of God be upon our shoulder  
 guiding, admonishing,  
 and the wisdom of all eyes be our sight.  
 May the courage of the martyrs be our inspiration,  
 pushing us beyond our fear; beyond mere wanting,  
 May our foolishness for Christ shame worldly wisdom.  
 May our ears gather up the voice of the Spirit.  
 May we not take ourselves so seriously  
 that we neglect to nurture joy in our being together.  
 Neither may we find cause to fear laying out our hearts.  
 Root deception out of us.  
 Convert appetite for power  
 to hunger for justice.  
 May our ears gather up the voice of the Spirit.  
 Amen*

Lani Wright, Cottage Grove, Oregon



## Bible Study 1 – Old Testament perspectives

### Different Senses (15 mins)

1. Read the following passages:
  - 1 Kings 19:12
  - 1 Samuel 16:6-7
  - Exodus 4:15-16
  - Genesis 32:24 and 30

Each of these accounts of God's self revealing engages a different sense or aspect of discernment. (Eg. hearing; sight; speech; and presence. Ask the group to discover which is which.

2. What do we learn from these examples?

### Specially Called? (20 mins)

Very often in the Hebrew scriptures we see individuals anointed for special ministry. The people of Israel were initially very dependent on the Judges and then the Kings. However when leaders moved away from God's will, God raised up prophets from all walks of life.



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1. Ask the group to name their favourite prophets and list some of their characteristics and things we know about them.
2. Why did God call them to speak?
3. What was the role of the prophets?
4. What do they say to us about the capacity of leaders to make godly decisions on their own?
5. Are the powerful always best placed to make godly decisions? Why?
6. What does this say to us about how decisions are made in contemporary church life?

Bible Study 2 – New Testament changes

**Discernment in Community (30 mins)**

Following Pentecost it appears that the Holy Spirit falls upon all believers, not only on specific individuals for specific tasks. Discernment thus becomes a more communal exercise. There were still people with specific leadership functions but the whole community tended to sit with important decisions eg. Acts 15. 1-34.



1. Read this passage together, making sure that the group understands the problem being addressed.
2. Next, list the processes by which the community managed this conflict within the community and found God's will within it. (Depending on the size of your group, begin in small groups and then after 10 mins, begin forming a joint list on a large sheet of paper)
3. How do individual leadership and the whole community co-operate together in the process?
4. What do we learn from this about the way we discern God's will in our church?



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## Readiness for Discernment (30 mins)

- Read together Romans 12:1-2  
*"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect"*
- Pull apart these verses and work together in thinking about what the practical realities are of discerning the will of God.
  - *by the mercies of God*
  - *present your bodies as a living sacrifice*
  - *holy and acceptable to God*
  - *which is your spiritual worship*
  - *do not be conformed to this world*
  - *but be transformed by the renewing of your minds*
  - *so that you may discern...*

Don't be happy with "spiritual" language but try and get to some down to earthy realities of what it might mean for you as individuals and as a church or leadership.

- Reflect together in a plenary session then spend some time praying that these things might become reality for you and your congregation.

## Patterns of Discernment (30 mins)

- Read individually through Revelation ch 2-3 which are Christ's letters to seven churches. Note the pattern to the letters...
 

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| An address         | <i>"to the angel of the church in..."</i>  |
| A self description | <i>"These are the words of Him who..."</i>   |
| Strengths          | <i>"I know your works..."</i>  |
| Weaknesses         | <i>"But I have this against you..."</i>  |
| Action             | <i>"Remember...Repent, and do..."</i>  |
| Invitation         | <i>"Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches"</i> |
| Promise            | <i>"To everyone who...I will give..."</i>  |

Despite the common pattern, it is clear that Jesus had a unique message for each individual church in its specific context.

- What are the benefits and dangers of adopting what God has said to another church community and making this your church practice?
- Try writing your own letter, in smaller groups, to your church using the pattern above.
- What might Jesus say if he were to write a letter to your church:
  - what might he commend you for?
  - what might he rebuke you for?
  - what might he encourage you to do?
- Share your letters with each other and let them lead you into prayer.



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**Some concluding questions...**

1. What do these New Testament studies teach us about how we should approach discerning God's will as church communities?
2. How do the Old and New Testament perspectives complement each other?
3. Try to summarize the key learnings from the study (ask each member to share the main thing that stays with them/energises them/concerns them) and together pray through these that they may positively impact your church.

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## 2. HOW DO WE START LISTENING TO GOD TOGETHER?



*The aim of this second study topic is to invite people to be really honest about how we 'hear' God and to encourage people to broaden their range of possibilities.*

### Ice breakers – *choose one*

1. Start a game of 'Chinese whispers'. Whisper a message in someone's ear, and ask them to pass it on to the next person, until it gets back to you. (5 mins)
2. Play a piece of loud rock/pop music, and afterwards see what lyrics people were able to make out. (5 mins)
3. Divide the group into 2 and tell them that they have 5 mins to devise a way of miming the bible story you have given them. They must then perform the mime to the other group (in under 3 mins) and see how long it takes the other group to get it. (15 mins)

*You could suggest Jesus at Cana turning the water into wine; the events of Pentecost; Moses casting plagues on Egypt; the friends bringing the paralysed man to Jesus through the roof.*

These all make the point that communication can be difficult and easily get confused. Sometimes it takes time and effort to get tuned in, or to fully grasp what is being communicated. It can be the same with 'hearing' God.

### Opening discussion – Listening to God? (allow 15-20 mins)

When we talk about listening to God, what is it that we are listening for?

Ask the group to share their experiences or ideas of what we mean when we use the language of listening and hearing. Encourage people to be honest, because often it is the *language that implies God clearly 'speaking'* which makes many people in church feel inadequate and as if they are failing.

Here are some possible answers...

- Is it like an audible voice... or an inner whisper?
- Is it like an inner stirring of the Spirit... but then how does it vary from a human emotion?
- Is it like an opening of myself to discover my own inner wisdom that has been shaped by my experience of God?
- Is it like deeply pondering the factors - Scripture, advice and circumstances – until the penny drops and I somehow know what to do?



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- Is it more mystical – a vision, a dream – something that I know I wouldn't have come up with on my own... but then how do I distinguish it from the stirrings of my own sub-conscious?
- Could it actually just be common sense?

The reality is that God 'speaks' in many ways and we similarly 'listen' in many ways. We can listen by using all our senses – when we speak of 'listening' we may be meaning being attentive to God by looking, waiting, empathising, experiencing, listening to others, feeling and even tasting.

.....

Prayer

*Creative God,  
 down through the centuries you have communicated in many different ways:  
 through a burning bush, through life-giving water, through dreams,  
 woollen fleeces, broken bread, the reading of a book,  
 the crowing of a cock and the faces of the poor.  
 Save us from creating formulae that prescribe the way that you will speak.  
 Let us be open to the unique way that you will reveal yourself to us.  
 Through Jesus Christ, our teacher and guide, we pray.  
 Amen.*

*(prayer by Geoff Pound)*

.....

ACTIVITY – ways in which we experience God

The aim of this exercise is to heighten our awareness that people hear or experience God in different ways and to explore what this might mean for your church.

**You will need**

A copy of the single page handout '**Ways we experience God**' for everyone in your group. (The material from the handout is on page 19 here). It is also formatted for easier printing in a separate PDF on the disk: see [ways we experience God.pdf](#)



**Time required**

Approximately half an hour.

**The process**

Within the diversity of our human experience and the breadth of the Spirit of God, people instinctively experience God in different ways. What are the different ways that people experience God in your church? Some of these are listed in the worksheet below.





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- 1 Hand out copies of the worksheet. Invite people, working individually to read the list through a couple of times. Then ask them to see if they can find 3 of these ways of praying or experiencing God that they are most attracted to. Of these, is there one that stands out as being their most instinctive way of being in communion with God?
- 2 Invite people to move into a small group of 4 to 6 people and share their discoveries.
- 3 In a plenary for the whole group, find out how many of the listed ways of experiencing God are represented within the group. What does this say about God? What does this say about the range of worship and prayer experiences your church provides?

### Some ways in which we experience God

*Which are your preferred three ways? Does our church value some ways more than others?*



I find God in my active work for church and Kingdom

I find God in supernatural experiences of God's presence

I find God in quietness and stillness through the inner journey

I find God in seeking justice and freedom for all people



I find God in proclaiming the Word, calling people to faith in Christ

I find God in the rhythms and melody of worshipping together

I find God in the enactment of baptism and the Lord's Supper



I find God in connection with creation

I find God in the struggle with and victory over spiritual darkness

I find God in the exploration of new ideas

I find God in deep connection with other people

I find God in the expression and reflection on the creative arts

Other ways.....



*This segment is also formatted as a handout for easier printing in a separate PDF on the disk: [ways we experience God.pdf](#)*



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## 3. HOW DO WE DISCERN GOD'S WILL?



The aim of this third study topic is to help people think about the ways we make decisions and how we begin to distinguish God-led decisions from others.

### Ice breaker (20 mins)

#### You will need

- to prepare enough postcard-sized cards to give one to each participant.
- a watch or clock with the second hand
- a bell

#### Steps



1. On each card write one of the following methods people use to help them make decisions about the future:
  - advice of friends
  - horoscopes
  - 'laying a fleece'
  - flipping a coin
  - waiting for a sign
  - consulting a specialist such as a pastor or counsellor
  - opening the Bible at random and pointing to a verse
  - palm reading
2. Ask each person to be an advocate for this particular method of finding 'the right way'. They have one minute to convince the others that this is an excellent way. Give them a couple of minutes to think of their argument.
3. The leader rings a bell when time is up.
4. The group then has ten minutes to talk about whether God's will can ever be found by using any or all of these methods.



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## REFLECTION

*“The task of discernment is like the work of an archaeologist. Discerning is not doing the work of an architect or a builder. We don’t design or create the will of God. Discernment is like the archaeologist who journeys and searches for something not apparent. They remove the rubble to discover the treasure that is already there.*

*“As archaeologists don’t come in with bulldozers and bob nail boots, discernment needs to be approached with great sensitivity and care.*

*“Discernment, like an archaeological dig, requires great time and patience.*

*“In contrast to so many contemporary methods for finding out the future and decision making, discernment is rarely a penny in the slot event. It’s more often a process in which things are revealed in time. It’s like cooking with a crock pot in which things need to simmer for a good long while.”*

Geoff Pound, Message on Discernment to BUV conference “Ears to Hear”

## Main exercise – personal experience

This is an interactive exercise for churches (or any group) to learn about discernment through reflecting on personal experience.

### Time required:

depending on the group, about 90 minutes.

### You will need:

- note paper and pens for each participant
- a flip chart with paper and textas to record feedback

### Process



1. Ask people to individually think of an experience of making a decision (preferably in group or church life, but it can also be a personal decision) in which they felt closely in communion with God. Give them a minute or two to bring such a situation to mind. Then ask them to identify what was most memorable about this experience. How did it feel? If in a group or church context, what was the impact of the experience on the community?
2. Draw people back into the group and ask them to share the most significant characteristics of making a decision when they felt in close communion with God.
3. Ask people to individually think of an experience of making a decision (preferably in group of church life, but it can also be a personal decision) in which they felt disconnected from God. Give them a minute or two to bring such a situation to mind. Then ask them to identify what was most memorable about this experience. How did it feel? If in a group or church context, what was the impact of the experience on the community?



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4. Draw people back into the group and ask them to share the most significant characteristics of making a decision when they felt disconnected from God.
5. Now invite people to think of a current decision they are facing for which the way forward is unclear (preferably in group or church life, but it can also be a personal decision). Give them a minute or two to bring such a situation to mind. Then ask them to imagine approaching the current decision using the characteristics noted earlier in the decision made in close communion with God.
6. Draw people back into the group and ask whether they felt they could learn from their earlier experience in their current decision.
7. Point out that the group has just been learning from their own experience some of the principles of discernment...
  - the first exercise – steps 1 and 2 above – illustrates from your own experience an example of what happens when decision-making is centred on God. This experience is often referred to as an experience of “consolation”. It provides a foundation for learning how God works in you and in your group or church when making a decision.
  - the second exercise – steps 3 and 4 above - provides an awareness of what can happen when we are no longer centred in God. This is often referred to as an experience of “desolation”. While it can be a disturbing experience, its gift is in helping you to be aware of when your decision-making has become distracted from your focus in God.
  - the third exercise – steps 5 and 6 above – can provide an illustration of how we can learn and grow through applying an experience when we were close to God to guide us in a current decision.

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### Going further – weighing it up

#### You will need

- to familiarise yourself with the four methods in the box below
- to have large sheets of paper available and some different coloured textas.

#### Time required:

about 40-45 mins

#### Steps



1. Think of a decision that you have made in recent months e.g. to build an extension to the church for use by the wider community; to employ another church worker; to begin a new outreach mission.
2. On four large sheets of paper, write up the four headings in the checklist on the next page. As you show each paper to the group give a little bit of background as indicated below.
3. Ask the group to assess the decision in the light of these guidelines. Go through them one by one and note down the key comments – use different colour textas for positive and negative comments. You will need to tease out ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ answers. For example, if someone says that



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the decision is in line with scripture – ask which scripture? And can people think of scripture that would suggest an alternative course of action?

- 4. Now consider a decision that is facing you as a church – repeat the exercise with another 4 sheets of paper and see if the group feels any clearer about the decision as a result of doing this.

A checklist for weighing an issue



1. Is it consistent with God’s revelation in Jesus through the Bible?

The Bible has always had primary authority for Baptist believers. It’s important for us to know that what we are hearing is consistent with who God is as revealed in Jesus. For example, if the church were hearing that it needed to remove itself from the corruption of society in order to worship God properly, we’d want to ask how that follows in the footsteps of Jesus who embraced sinful and outcast people.

2. What is its fruit?

In other words, if we fully lived into this direction, what would its consequences be? What impact would it have on our church’s mission, its worship, its care, its nurturing of people into the ways of Jesus? When this direction is fully developed, does this look like being “Good News” of the Kingdom of God?

3. Does this direction enrich us or deplete us?

God’s call is toward love, life and liberation. So, at the core of our life together, does this direction feel life-giving, energetic, and hopeful? Do we feel enriched by it? Does it build us up? If so, it sounds like the sort of gift that God would give us.

Or, as we consider this direction, do we feel heavy, burdened, depleted? As worthy as the direction may sound, does it actually leave us feeling disturbed or drained? Then it may be that we are listening to the voice of our own sense of duty or obligation, rather than the voice of God.

Of course, we are not advocating, “If it feels good, do it.” The feelings of lightness or heaviness are more about what we experience deep in our spirit rather than our immediate feelings. We all know the experience of doing something quite hard that actually liberates and energises us. We also know the feeling of doing something that seems pleasurable, but at the end, leaves us feeling empty.

4. Is it consistent with the fruit of the Spirit?

If a direction we are contemplating is consistent with “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23), then it sounds like the calling card of the Spirit.

For example, if someone’s sense of God’s leading feels urgent, driven and compulsive, then you may need to reflect as a community on whether it is consistent with the Spirit’s patience. If the word that comes to you sounds harsh, judgmental or demanding, you may need to enquire whether it is consistent with the Spirit’s gentleness.

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## 4. SOME WAYS TO PRACTISE NEW SKILLS



*Rwandese orphans peer into the viewfinder as they film each other for the first time.*

### Ice breaker (20 mins)

#### You will need:

Either a simple jigsaw puzzle (up to 100 pieces) OR a simple children's story.

#### Exercise:

##### 1. Jigsaw:

Without showing the group the final picture, distribute the individual pieces evenly among the members of the group. Ask each member to observe one piece and to guess what the final picture will look like. Then invite the group to work together to complete the puzzle.

##### Story:

Photocopy the pages of the story and distribute the pages in random order among the members of the group. Ask each member to read one of the pages to themselves and then to guess what the story is about. Now read the pages aloud and see if the group can reassemble the story into its proper sequence.

##### 2. Finally, ponder other examples of activities when separate parts come together to make a cohesive whole. Examples could come from music, sport, business, the arts, etc.

##### 3. In what ways can this also be true when a church seeks to make a decision together?

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## A brief Bible reflection

Read together one of the New Testament's stories about teamwork...

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

Romans 12:4-8

Ephesians 4:4-13

.....

## Prayer

*God of love,*

*You call us to be a community of people who reflect your love.*

*This is a great challenge to us.*

*In our society we are encouraged to be individuals, to make our own private choices, to manage our own lives and be masters of our own destiny.*

*You give us a vision of a church when none of us is complete in ourselves, but together, in dependence on you, we grow to maturity together.*

*We offer our gift and benefit from the gifts of others.*

*We speak our own convictions and listen to the convictions of others.*

*We discover the call of your Spirit together, more clearly than any of us could do on our own.*

*God, help us to grow to know and trust one another, so that we may express who we are: the Body of Christ.*

*Amen.*

.....

*NOTE: The purpose of the following study (pp 26-27) is to give us some practice of speaking, listening and discerning together. There are two exercises below: the first is an exercise in group discernment based on a passage of Scripture. The second is an exercise in group discernment based on the sharing of life experience. Both can be helpful exercises in building a discerning community. There is probably only time to do one of them; either will stand alone as an experience of group discernment.*



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## Exercise 1– Listening to the Bible together



This exercise provides a simple opportunity for members of any group to begin to listen to God together through hearing a passage from the Bible and reflecting prayerfully together on what it is saying both individually and to the group. It will be particularly well suited to a Bible study or home group, but may also be well used by any leadership or ministry group – or even in an informal worship service or as part of a church meeting.

### You will need:

the facilitator will need a Bible

### Time required:

about an hour.

### Steps

1. Sit comfortably in a circle. If there are more than twelve people, break up into small groups of six to eight. It will be important for everyone to be in the same room and to hear the facilitator. The facilitator will need to have selected a passage of Scripture for the group to reflect on. The passage should not be too long: two to six verses are usually enough. Stories are best, but any passage can be used.
2. Bring the group(s) to quiet. You may like to use the following process:
  - Invite people to come to a comfortable sitting position.
  - Invite people to relax their bodies. They may like to use their breathing: breathing in the peace of God; breathing out any tension in their bodies. This is not a full relaxation exercise, so just give people about a minute to still their bodies in this way.
  - Invite people to become conscious of how they are feeling: happy, tired, stretched, sorrowful – encourage them to accept however their body is feeling. Again give them a minute or two to do this.
  - Invite people to imagine what it would be like to catch a glimpse of God's loving welcome as they come to listen together to God.
3. Into this quiet, attentive space, tell people you are about to read a passage from the Bible. Encourage them not to try to analyse it, but just to listen attentively and notice their reactions to the story. Then read the chosen Bible passage without rush. If it's only two or three verses, you may like to read it twice.
4. Without breaking into the stillness, invite people to stay with whatever has impacted them in the reading. It may be a word or a phrase or a character in the story. Or the passage may have evoked a feeling. Just stay present to whatever has been experienced.
5. Allow people to be silent for about three minutes. (Groups that are familiar with silence may continue for five minutes; groups that are completely unfamiliar with holding silence may find that two minutes is long enough.)
6. Gently invite people to focus back within the group. This may be done by a simple, quiet prayer, e.g.: "Thank you for your presence among us, God. Grant us ears to hear what your Spirit is saying to us. Amen."





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7. Go around the group, and invite each member to simply share what they experienced or heard in the silence as they allowed the Scripture passage to percolate within them. Point out that high-powered academic insight is not what is needed here. The emphasis is on simply offering what has been experienced. Point out that nobody is obligated to speak; they may pass if they wish.

Emphasise that there is to be no discussion or debate as people share, just attentive listening to what God might be saying within the group through one another. After each person has shared, pause for about 10 seconds to hold what has been said before the next person speaks of their experience.

8. Once everybody has shared, invite the group to return to silence for a minute and ask them to ponder what they have heard within the group. Is there anything that God's Spirit is saying to the group? In this way we are moving from listening as individuals to listening as a gathered community.
9. Invite anyone to contribute what they have heard within the group. Sharing at this point need not be so formal, and gentle discussion may emerge, but don't allow it to get off track into debating ideas. Stay with what the group has experienced.
10. If there have been more than one group sharing the exercise, it may be important to conclude with the group sharing an open plenary to talk about what each group experienced and heard together. Do your best to keep the respectful, prayerful listening to one another.
11. Conclude with a simple prayer of thanksgiving for God's presence.

## Exercise 2 – Listening to one another's stories



*The aim here is introduce people to a simple experience of discernment, focusing particularly on the practice of sharing and listening within a group. It can be very helpful for groups to have the simple experience of hearing their own voice in a group talking about some aspect of their faith experience... and of hearing others speak of experiences that are different. This becomes a great training ground for group discernment.*

### Time required:

about an hour, although this may vary with the size of the group.



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## You will need:

only someone to facilitate the process.

## Steps

1. Sit comfortably in a circle. If there are more than 8 people, break up into small groups of 6 to 8 people. It will be important for everyone to be in the same room and to hear the facilitator.
2. The facilitator begins by inviting the group to ponder a question that enables the members of the group to ponder some aspect of the story of their faith journey.

Here are a few examples:

- recall a time in your life when the presence of God was very vivid for you. What did you experience? What impact did the experience have on your life?
- recall a particular Scripture passage that has had a decisive impact on your life at a specific time. Share how this came about and what happened as a result.

**“Has there been a moment when you knew the leading of God? What was that experience like for you?”**

- has there been a moment in your life when you have experienced the leading of God – to a decision, a vocation or a relationship? What was this experience like for you? How has it affected the rest of your life?
- the love of God is often mediated to us through the love of other people. Who in your life has been most significant in helping you to experience the love of God? What is it about this person that has been so important to you?

Having chosen one theme, the facilitator gives the members of the group a minute or two to identify the experience they would like to share and especially to focus on what has been most important about this experience.

3. Following the silence, each member of the group will have up to five minutes – but no longer – to share their story. This is not a sermon or a speech or an argument! It is a simple-hearted, honest statement about a deep and powerful experience. The facilitator will indicate to the group that she/he will act as time-keeper and help keep people on track. Everyone is encouraged to participate, but people may pass if they wish.
4. After each person has spoken, there will be a short pause to allow the person's story to continue to resonate within the group.
5. Once everybody has spoken, the facilitator invites people to another 2 or 3 minutes of silence to allow the experience of “sacred story” to stay with the group. Within the silence, invite people to reflect upon what they have sensed God saying within the group's experience of sharing and listening.
6. The facilitator may like to conclude the silence with a simple prayer of thanks for God's presence. Then the facilitator can invite anyone to share what they have sensed God stirring among them in telling and listening to their stories. Sharing at this point need not be so formal, and gentle discussion may emerge, but don't allow it to get off track into debating ideas. Stay with what the group has experienced.
7. If there have been more than one group sharing the exercise, it may be important to conclude with the group sharing an open plenary to talk about what each group experienced and heard together. However, it would be wise not to offer details of others' stories within the larger group. Do your best to continue the respectful, prayerful listening to one another.
8. Conclude with a simple blessing.



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# SERMON OUTLINE

## LISTENING TO GOD AS A CHURCH

### Bible Readings:

Acts 16:6-10, Romans 12:1-2, James 1:5-8

### Outline

There is nothing more important for the church to do in the early part of the 21st century than to **deepen its capacity to listen** to God's voice.

We live in a time when we don't just need good ideas; we need **God ideas**.

We live in a time when people are seeking much more than forms of religious practice; they are seeking **genuine relationship** with God.

*"Let those who have ears, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."* (Rev 2,3)

We are both commanded and invited to **tune in to the unique word** that God has for our church.

**The things that move us may be the will of God or they may be a projection of our own deep need.**

Listening to God is not always easy.

We humans are incredibly complex. We are full of needs, desires, hopes, dreams, fears and terrors – many of them **buried so deep in our life experience** that we may not always recognise them. **The things that move us** may be the will of God or they may be a projection of our own deep need.

To **become a church of discernment**, we need to work together, to trust each other, to be grounded in the Scriptures, to be growing in personal and spiritual maturity and to be patient.

In Acts 16:6-10, **it takes a series of obstacles** and reaching a point where there is nowhere left to go for Paul to hear God!

Listening to God requires clear-mindedness that **we do actually want to know** the will of God for us!

In Romans 12:1-2, Paul encourages the church to offer ourselves to God, not just individually, but **especially as a community**. Then, as our focus moves away from the expectations and fashions of the world around us and we allow God to shape us, we will be able to know the will of God.

James 1:5-8 tells us that **we can't make up our own minds and seek God's wisdom** at the same time. If we do, our search for God's will becomes confused and fruitless.

Listening to God needs an **attentive spirit**. An attentive spirit means:

1. listening to the Bible – not just to find a text that justifies our own preferred position, but in order **to deepen our understanding** of what is important to God.
2. listening to the community around us – not to be conformed all over again, but **to hear** people's needs, **to understand** their dreams and fears and **to reflect** on how the Gospel of Jesus meets them.
3. listening **to one another**. For that to happen, we all need to be growing in grace. We all have a part to play in discerning the mind of Christ.



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- 4. **listening to the least powerful** people. The Bible and history tell us that God often chooses to speak “from the margins” – through the means we would have thought to be the least significant: children and people who are shy, vulnerable and on the fringe of church life - people whose fragility opens them deeply to God.
- 5. waiting on God. Don’t panic if clarity does not come immediately. Sometimes the decision we seek becomes less important than the community’s **growing relationship** with God **as we wait together**.
- 6. [requires] godly, non-anxious leadership. Their role is not to make the decision, but **to lead the process** of prayer, listening and respectful openness to one another within which the community can open itself to the will of God.

Listening to God means “*testing the spirits*” (1 Cor 12:10, 1 Jn 4:1) When we do have a sense of what God might be saying, there are two classic questions we need to make space for.

- 1. What will be **the fruit of this option** when it is fully grown?
- 2. Would this decision **lead us more fully toward God**, life, love, freedom and joy or does it lead us toward guilt, burden, heaviness of spirit and obligation?

By reflecting on such questions, we are able to have a deep sense of whether this leading is **consistent with the character of God**.

Listening to God means **recognising the time** for courageous action.

Listening to God is quite different from navel gazing. The object is both **knowing and doing** the will of God. When it seems good to us and the Holy Spirit to act, it is time to **invest ourselves** in the calling of God with trust, courage, adventure and joy.

Listening to God is an exhilarating adventure. In the end, it’s not only about making right decisions, but about our **growth as a church into God**, a clearer awareness of who God has called us to be, a **deeper community** with one another and a **deeper passion for the world** to whom God is calling us to share the Good News of Christ.

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# CREATIVE MEETINGS

## DOING DECISION-MAKING MEETINGS DIFFERENTLY



We recognise that there will always be a place for a Church Meeting to make decisions about a church's organisational life; constitutional decisions about calling a pastor or buying or selling property or receiving a church budget or major decisions of church policy and direction will always require the affirmation of the Church Meeting.

But there are a great many other decisions that can creatively engage the whole church community.

So if a church meeting is not so much about doing business, but about discerning God's presence and leading within our church, then a myriad of creative possibilities open for how we might meet together. We no longer need to imagine ourselves sitting in rows or in a circle with the chairperson and secretary at a table at the front. We no longer need to see the meeting in terms of reports and motions, points of order and voting.

This section explores some alternate ways of approaching church meetings. The following sections offer some activities and exercises that can be adopted within any meeting as it opens itself to God's leading.

### 1. Running a Church Forum

These events are particularly helpful when a church is seeking to gain a sense of God's direction and vision for the church or for a specific ministry of the church. They help to generate the broad brush strokes of ideas and possibilities, which a smaller group can then refine.

Whilst some churches see the casting of a vision to be the function of leadership, many have found that having the church as a whole take part in the preliminary stages is very helpful in the building and nurturing of community. It also enables the church to catch the potentially prophetic voices that might come from unexpected quarters. If your church is over 200 in number you may need to adapt the model below, and possibly replicate the event a number of times.

A forum may work best around a meal. Many churches choose to have a lunch together following a shortened time of worship. You will therefore need to ensure a suitable venue that can accommodate



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everyone seated around tables. Ideally one would want no more that 8-10 at a table. A team needs to be delegated to arrange the catering, but it is important that people are not locked away in the kitchen for long periods. Ideally the meal should either be a 'bring and share', or a selection of pre-prepared platters or dishes that do not require last-minute attention.

Similarly you will need to decide whether the activity is to be inclusive of children, and, if not, perhaps approach another church to help feed and occupy the children while you are in the Forum. This will enable the maximum numbers of your own people to be fully engaged with the process. It is our sense that most of the activities could be inclusive of eight year olds and over.

Preparing the congregation

People need to be prepared for the Forum so that they can prayerfully open themselves to new possibilities, and intentionally take time to listen to God in their reading of scripture and in the general stuff of daily life.

It might be worth preaching about listening to God in one of the weeks leading up to the Forum – see pages 29-30 for some ideas on this.

A card could be distributed among the congregation including:

- the key question for discernment
- a prayer that the congregation members can pray each day
- some space for noting ideas and reflections

This can be handed out at a service, or posted to people.





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## Preparing facilitators

You will need one facilitator for every table at the event. These people need to be chosen for their ability to draw ideas out of others. They need to be good listeners, and able to stimulate discussion.

The aim is to focus on what God wants. It is not to hear our pet hobby horses and preferences. The role of the facilitator is to encourage people to dream and to help them to think outside of the box. You want to generate ideas, not close off options at this stage.

## The role of the facilitator is to encourage people to dream

You may want to provide facilitators with some alternative methods of generating ideas, in case people have not come prepared (see the chapter on **Creative Thinking**).

A facilitator should be encouraged to choose a method that appeals to them and bring along enough materials for the number of people on their table.

## On the day

Each table will need

- several pieces of butchers paper
- at least one texta
- eight sets of coloured stickers

## Suggested outline

This order works on a meeting going from 12-3pm. Obviously it can be adapted. Someone will need to be the Process Co-ordinator.

- 45 mins for gathering and lunch
- 45 mins discussion around tables
- 15 mins writing up to six key ideas and appointing a spokesperson
- 50 mins listening to each group
- 10 mins silence
- 10 mins prioritising
- Closing prayer/worship

## Steps

1. In order to mix people up at tables, you might want to give people numbers at the door (e.g. if you have 20 tables of 8, you will need 8 sets of pieces of paper numbered 1-20). This will ensure that families and age groups get dispersed.
2. Gather and eat
3. Clear plates and facilitators introduce the exercises. Appoint a scribe to write down ideas as they arise – allow about 45 mins for brainstorming
4. Stop and quietly look at the ideas that have been documented at the table. Where do you sense God's spirit? Which ideas feel life-giving, even if at present they seem impractical or unrealisable? Allow a few minutes for reflection.
5. See if the group can agree on up to 6 of the most significant ideas/ways forward. Write these up on a fresh sheet of paper, with as much space between each idea as possible. Ask one of the





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group to be a spokesperson for the table.

6. The process co-ordinator invites the spokesperson from each table in turn to share their table's ideas. After each table has shared, the whole group quietly reflects on what has been said for a few moments. The paper is put up on the wall.
7. When every table has shared its discoveries, the whole group is invited to sit quietly and replay what has been said and think about at which points their spirits feel lifted or quickened – where was there a sense of God's spirit.
8. Table facilitators distribute 3 colored stickers to each person at their table, and invite them to place a sticker against the 3 ideas they feel most strongly drawn to.
9. The co-ordinator then does a quick count of the most popular ideas and thanks everyone for their participation.
10. The next phase of the process is then committed to God in prayer, either from the front, or if there is time around the tables.

## 2. Using Small Group and email networks

Small groups are an excellent way to facilitate community discernment. If well facilitated, they provide the ideal climate to enable people to listen to God and to each other, and if a church has a good email network, this enables groups to share their thoughts and listen to each other.

There are also many ways to collaborate online. Here are some starting points for more information...

**groups** <http://groups.google.com/>

<http://groups.yahoo.com/>

**blogs** <https://www.blogger.com/start>

<http://www.squarespace.com/>

<http://wordpress.org/>



### Stage 1 – preparation

The pastor or small groups co-ordinator (or both) needs to gather the small group leaders together to help them to understand the issue and the guidance that is sought. They need to understand the briefing paper (*see next page*) and how to conduct a meeting so that it is not simply a discussion, but a process of intentional listening to God in each other.

There needs to be a discipline encouraged within the group so that no idea is closed down. People need to encourage and affirm each other's perceptions no matter how odd they are! We are not arguing and debating with each other. No one should respond "well there's no way that can work!" Initially the aim is to hear all perspectives and points of view, and then later to weigh them, and discern together which ideas have the hallmarks of God's spirit.

Small group leaders will also need some pieces of butchers paper and textas when their small group meets to discuss their ideas.

### Stage 2 – meeting in small groups

1. **The small group meets** the following week and begins the meeting in silence. This may be a guided time, with the leader offering opportunity at intervals to...



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- let go of anything that impedes the movement of the Spirit in our lives – unforgiveness, prejudices, deeply held agendas...
  - open our hearts and minds to God – to the possibility of new things, new ways
  - reflect on the thoughts and events of the last week which have had a bearing on the question we are dealing with.
  - pray for the time together that we may hear God's voice in and through one another.
- The leader provides sheets of large paper and textas and someone is appointed to record the key ideas as they arise.

### 2. Initial sharing

- how did you go praying about this through the week?
- was it easy or hard to pray about the issue each day?

#### *Sample briefing paper*

### the issue:

Is God calling us to begin to pay someone to lead our young people - do we need a part-time youth pastor?

### questions:

Why might it be a good time to call a youth pastor?  
 Why might it be a bad time?  
 Should this be the priority for our church at this time?  
 Is this what God is calling us to do?

### process:

The small group leader gives the issue and these questions to the small group at the end of an evening and asks them to...

- pray about these questions each day during the week
- note anything that comes up in their daily readings that seems to be of relevance
- note any conversations or encounters that seem to have a bearing on the question

### 3. Key questions (based on the sample briefing paper)

#### Q1. Why might it be a good time to call a youth pastor?

- in your reading/reflection, what led you to think that this might be a good time?
- what events/circumstances have happened that have impacted you about this?

#### Q2. Why might it be a bad time to call a youth pastor?

- what in your reading/reflection led you to think that this might be a bad time?
- what events/circumstances have happened that have impacted you about this?



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### Q3. Should this be the priority for our church at this time?

- what in your reading and reflection led you to think that this is or is not the priority for our church at this time?
- what events/circumstances have happened that have impacted you about this?

### Q4. Is this what God is calling us to do?

- what in your reading and reflection led you to think that this is or is not the thing that God is calling us to do?
- what events/circumstances have happened that have impacted you about this?

4. **Reviewing:** the group looks at what has been recorded on the sheets, in silence, praying that God will lead us to the most important elements. The group begins to circle the key things that have emerged that they would like to share with other groups in the church.
5. **Statement of key reflections:** the group agrees a shared statement of some key reflections, and someone volunteers to write this up and post it on the website or email conversation group, so that it can be shared with other groups.

### Stage 3 – follow up



1. The following week, or when all the small groups have had a chance to meet and listen together and have posted their reports on the website or email conversation group, all groups are invited to prayerfully read the reflections of other groups through the week. Then when each small group meets again, there is opportunity to reflect on all the material.
2. At regular intervals through this small group discussion, it would be good to stop and be quiet together and keep asking the question, *where am I sensing God in what we are talking about?*
3. Some questions for discussion:
  - do certain ideas stand out or excite us?
  - are there some common threads emerging?
  - are we hearing similar things?
  - is a consensus beginning to emerge or is there such a diversity of views that suggest more work, before coming to a decision?
  - is there something quite different emerging that we'd like to explore?
4. Again it would be worth agreeing a statement to be shared with other groups, which indicates whether the group feels that there is sufficient consensus to move forward with the idea or reject it, or whether there is a sense that some other key questions/issues need addressing first.

### Stage 4 – conclusion

After these statements have been circulated the pastor and small groups co-ordinator and possibly the small group leaders can meet again to decide how to progress with the issue in the light of the group responses.



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## 3. Meetings as Worship



This is not so much a one-off exercise as a different rhythm of meeting together. The aim is to enable church meetings – of the whole congregation and of leadership/ministry groups – to consciously centre their awareness and their considerations on God.

Fashioning the meeting around the pattern of a worship service rather than a business agenda enables a deeper awareness that the purpose of the meeting is to discern the presence and leading of God.

With practice, it will not make meetings longer; in fact it will probably make them shorter. Some hours will initially be required by those responsible for setting meeting agendas, to shape them differently.

### You will need...

only people who are willing to have a go at something different and some creativity in preparing meeting agendas.

### Rationale

A church does not meet together to run a business. Its only purpose in meeting together is to hear and act on the leading of God. So why do we have so many business meetings in our churches? This idea puts into practice the belief that every time we meet together, we meet to worship God and part of our worship is to seek God's leading for our life together. Ultimately, all the questions a church asks are spiritual questions. Therefore we need meetings for "Listening to what the Spirit is saying to the churches", not meetings to do business.

### Process



In theory this is quite simple (although because its way of thinking is so different, it may take some creativity and some trial and error and some practice to bed it down into church life).

It works like this. Next time you plan an agenda for a "decision-making meeting", don't prepare the agenda in the usual way. Instead of using headings like "business arising", "reports", or "general business", start with your church's order of service for a recent service of worship and organise your meeting around the pattern of your Sunday worship.



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One of the implications of this is that you may spend time in your meetings singing, praying, reading the Bible, listening to God and offering your lives to God. Other creative possibilities open as well. For example...

- instead of seeing “reports” as a means of enabling management of the church’s business system, receive them as “stories of God’s activity among us”- like a testimony coming from a group at work in your church’s mission. Give thanks to God for the fruit of this ministry. As issues of concern arise, pray over them and pray for the leaders of the ministries.
- instead of seeing “correspondence” as a nuisance that takes up time, receive it as “news and invitations of God’s activity in the world beyond our church”. This can become a time of praying for the health of the mission of God’s church in various places, missions and ministries.
- instead of grappling with the finance report, read it as a statement of the resources with which God has blessed us and our priorities in using them. You can ask yourself periodically, “How well does this reflect God’s call and priorities for our church life?”

Here is a sample outline of what a worshipful church meeting may look like. (The encouragement is not to slavishly adopt this one, but to use it as a starter for your own church’s approach.)

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**Sample meeting outline**



**1. Opening worship**

- we sing together a song worshipping God.
- we offer our meeting and our lives to God as an offering of worship.
- we listen to a reading of Scripture together and spend a period of silence while we allow God to speak to us.

**2. Community Notices, Stories, Testimonies and Prayer**

- we read the minutes of our last meeting as a way of acknowledging the ongoing story of God among us.
- the Pastor’s report focuses us on what God is doing in our church life. We celebrate the good news of God’s presence among us and we seek God’s leading about things that are causing us concern.
- we receive the finance report or the budget as a way of celebrating God’s blessing of our life together and the ways we are using the resources God has given us. The treasurer then invites us to pray together for the various ministries of the church we are financing together.
- any other reports are brought as testimonies of God’s work among us.

**3. Continuing worship and offering**

- we sing another song of worship.
- with our hearts full of God’s work among us, we pause for a few moments to rededicate our lives to God in our shared ministry. We may ponder, “Is there anything that God is calling me/us to do?”



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**4. Listening to God’s word to us**

- there may be one or two questions in church life – about vision, direction and policy for future ministry - for which we are seeking the leading of God. We prayerfully hear the questions and concerns, and after a time of silent prayer, we offer to one another what God is stirring within us.

Rather than debate, we respectfully listen to one another, until some clarity begins to emerge concerning what God is saying to us. We respond by writing down our decision and giving thanks to God.

**5. Closing**

- we conclude with a final song and prayer of thanks for God’s presence among us. We pray together that the decisions we have made would be fruitful for the Kingdom.

**Some implications**

You may find that as you engage in meetings like this, you discover new things you want to add to your service of worship. For example...

- When the church receives painful or distressing news, you may want to add a prayer of confession, in which the community can share in acknowledging your shared failure to express the love of God, or a prayer of lament, in which you cry out to God to address the pain and injustice of the world.
- Or at an Annual General Meeting, the appointment of new office bearers may lead you to adding a prayer of commissioning and laying on of hands.

It would be interesting if your worshipful meeting started to suggest additional things you could add into the order of service for your worship service!

Another implication is that meeting agendas need to become leaner. That requires more detailed management issues to be trusted to other ministry leaders and groups.

**Final suggestion**

Any new way of doing things will feel uncomfortable or contrived at first. But persevere and make it your own. Don't reject it just because on first experiment it didn't feel quite right.



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# CREATIVE LISTENING

## INDIVIDUAL DISCERNMENT EXERCISES, LEADING TO A WHOLE CHURCH LISTENING DAY.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

There are occasions when significant church decisions warrant inviting the whole congregation to participate in an intentional period of prayerful reflection, followed by a time of community listening. Following such a process, recommendations can be shaped for a final decision.

This is a method that can be adapted for a number of different major decisions in church life, e.g. seeking a new structure for leadership in the church or exploring better usage of church facilities or commencing a new ministry direction.

There are a number of related handouts on the **Open to God** CD. They are Acrobat PDF files formatted for black and white printing. To download the latest version of Adobe Acrobat Reader, go to <http://www.adobe.com/>



- 1 **A time for change?:** fourteen days of readings, activities and reflections for a church community that is seeking to discern whether to renew or conclude a pastoral appointment (p.41). See [a time for change-booklet.pdf](#)
- 2 **Renewing the vision:** fourteen days of readings, exercises and reflections for a church that is seeking to discern God's leading for the church's future direction (p.42). See [renewing the vision-booklet.pdf](#)
- 3 **Covenant form:** for people who would like to commit to the fourteen day listening process. See [covenant form.pdf](#)
- 4 **Renewing the vision for children:** a parallel fourteen days of readings and activities for children, so that their sense of God's presence and leading can inform the adults' listening meeting. See [kids listening to God-booklet.pdf](#)
- 5 **Covenant form for kids:** for children who would like to commit to the kid's version of the fourteen day process. See [kids covenant form.pdf](#)
- 6 **Listening time leader's guides:** leader's guide to facilitating a community listening times. (pp 44 and 46). See [renewing the vision-listening guide.pdf](#) and [a time for change-listening guide.pdf](#)
7. **Six reflection questions:** to be used as part of *A Time for Change?* community listening time (p.45). See [six reflection questions.pdf](#)
8. **Five questions for refreshing:** to be used as part of *Renewing the Vision* community listening time (p.48). See [five questions for refreshing.pdf](#)

#### Booklet printing...

Please note that three of the documents on the disk are designed to be printed as multi-page, double sided booklets. These are *Renewing the Vision*, *A Time for Change?* and *Kids listening to God*. The PDFs for those are in the "for booklet printing" folder. You'll find some help with printing the booklets [here](#).

Simpler versions of the PDF for viewing on-screen or for single-sided printing are in the folder "for viewing booklets on-screen".



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## 2. A Time for Change?

A resource to help a pastor and congregation decide whether to renew or conclude a pastoral appointment. See [a time for change.pdf](#)

### When should we use this?



If a pastor, or a group in the church, is beginning to sense that it may be time to move on, the church can begin to experience a rocky patch in its life. Pastors can feel quite isolated at this time and don't know how to make the decision to leave constructively. Or if some in the congregation feel that the Pastor's time is ending, factions can be created in church life, and if such divisions are not attended to, they can quickly become destructive. A pastor, who has had a good ministry until that point, can find that they are leaving badly with all sorts of unnecessarily bad relationships.

In the past, congregations have often sought a "Pastoral Review" to address such an issue. However, it is our view that a review should primarily be used for on-going encouragement and minor adjustment to a pastoral ministry. It is a tool which promotes health and should not be used as a lever to eject a pastor.

Instead we are suggesting that the Pastor and the Church together engage in a prayerful exercise that seeks to put the emphasis on what is God's will in this situation. In the end it doesn't matter whether or not I like the pastor – the most important thing to determine is whether or not God is still calling her or him to that role.

If we can pray and listen to God and to each other in a genuinely open way, a pastor's ending, or re-affirmation in the pastorate, can be handled in a much better way.

### What do we need to do



A small group should be appointed to oversee the process. A spokesperson for the group needs to maintain regular contact with the congregation – explaining the process over a number of weeks so that people are fully prepared.

1. You will need to allocate two weeks for the listening exercises and then a Sunday at the end of this time for a Listening Day. (Often churches have had a shortened morning worship that day, and the listening process forms part of an extended morning service.) After the Listening Day it may be important to plan a Church meeting when the final decision can be made regarding the pastoral appointment.
2. Each member of the congregation needs a copy of the booklet *A time for change?*
3. Ideally this should be available in an addressed envelope with a letter explaining the process. This should be available in church for two weeks in advance and then mailed if the individual has not been present at the church.





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## What happens?

The aim is that individuals covenant to prayerfully take time (15-20 mins) each day to work through the biblical and practical exercises, and make notes about the experience. It is hoped that people will be enabled to listen to God by doing this.

Each booklet includes space for writing notes, so that individuals can jot down what they sense each day that God may be saying and then review some recurrent themes at the end of the time.

On the Listening Day, individuals are invited to share what they have heard, either with the whole group, or in small groups, and the pastor and congregation listens carefully to each voice, seeking to discern common threads, and to gain some sense of what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Everything that is said is noted down by specially appointed scribes, and the notes of the day are made available to the congregation for further prayer and reflection.

Most congregations and pastors have found that this gives greater clarity to the key issues and enables the responsibility for the subsequent decision to be more shared and transparent. This helps to maintain better relationships and promotes better endings or more cohesive new beginnings!

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## 3. Renewing the Vision

*This is an adapted version of "A Time for Change?" but has been used more extensively. It is designed for churches which are seeking God's leading for their future directions.*

see [renewing the vision.pdf](#)



It has been used in many churches in conjunction with a number of other processes as part of a Church Review – a process designed to help churches find a new vision or direction for the next five years of ministry.

As a result of the use of this resource in several churches with active children's ministries, a version of Renewing the Vision for children is also available. See [kids listening to God.pdf](#). Under the guidance of the church's children's ministry team, the church's children work through their booklets at home over the fortnight. At the Listening Meeting that follows the fortnight, it will be important that the children have an opportunity to share with the adults what they have discovered in their prayers and activities over the fortnight.

## When should we use this?

This resource is quite adaptable in its application and can be used when:

- a church has concluded a five-year vision or strategic plan and is seeking a renewed sense of vision for the future
- a church feels that it has lost its way, or feels stuck or stale
- a church is wanting to reconnect with its surrounding community
- a church feels a need to clarify its priorities in its mission and wants to spend time waiting on God.

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## What do we need to do

A small group should be appointed to oversee the process. A spokesperson for the group needs to maintain regular contact with the congregation – explaining the process over a number of weeks so that people are fully prepared.

1. You will need to allocate two weeks for the listening exercises and then a Sunday at the end of this time for a Listening Day. (Often churches have had a shortened morning worship that day, and the listening process forms part of an extended morning service.) After the Listening Day it may be important to schedule further congregational gatherings at which the material gathered at the Listening Day can be distilled and clarified into priorities.
2. Each member of the congregation needs a copy of the booklet – [renewing the vision.pdf](#).
3. Ideally this should be available in an addressed envelope with a letter explaining the process. This should be available in church for two weeks in advance and then mailed if the individual has not been present at the church.
4. A decision should be made as to whether to involve the children through [kids listening to God.pdf](#). It will be important to discuss how best to facilitate this with your church's children's ministry leaders.



## What happens?

The aim is that individuals covenant to prayerfully take time (15-20 mins) each day to work through the biblical and practical exercises, and make notes about the experience. It is hoped that people will be enabled to listen to God by doing this.

Each booklet includes space for writing notes, so that individuals can jot down what they sense each day that God may be saying and then review some recurrent themes at the end of the time.

On the Listening Day, individuals are invited to share what they have heard, either with the whole group, or in small groups, and the pastor and congregation listens carefully to each voice, seeking to discern common threads, and to gain some sense of what the Spirit is saying to the Church. Everything that is said is noted down by specially appointed scribes, and the notes of the day are made available to the congregation for further prayer and reflection.

Most congregations and leadership groups have found that this gives greater clarity to the key issues and enables the responsibility for the developing vision to be more shared and transparent.

## 4. Frequently asked questions about Time for Change and Renewing the Vision

**The whole process  
of discernment  
involves  
relinquishing our  
pre-conceived ideas  
and being  
open to God'**

*Q. Why do you fill in a covenant form?*

Filling in the form helps to give gravitas to the process, and helps people to be more accountable for the process. It is also essential that the church knows who has done the exercises so that the Listening Meeting process can be properly managed.

*Q. Why do you suggest that people don't talk about their exercises during the process?*

If a church community is beginning to polarise into different 'camps' it is better that people do not reinforce each other's prejudices and

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thinking by talking together. The whole process of discernment involves relinquishing our pre-conceived ideas and being open to God’s new thing. This will happen much better if people follow the exercises on their own.

Q. *Why can only those who have done the exercises speak at the Listening Day?*

The purpose of the Listening Day is so that the people who have prayed through the exercises over the fortnight can share what they have sensed God saying. Those who have not shared in the exercises are not able to do this. However, at the end of the Listening Meeting there is an opportunity for everybody who has been part of the Listening Meeting – both those who have done the fortnight of prayer and those who have not – to reflect prayerfully on what they have heard God saying through Listening Meeting.

5. Guidelines for facilitating a Listening Meeting...  
A Time for Change?

*The aim is to move the community from listening to God individually through the prayerful listening exercises in ‘A Time for Change?’ to listening to God together as a church in order to discern God’s will for the future of the pastoral appointment.*

**You will need**

1. Clear communication of an invitation to a “listening meeting” for the whole church community.
2. A facilitator to guide the process. This may be someone from your own church community, although there is value in someone from outside your church doing this so that everyone can be involved. You may like to speak to your regional minister who has experience in facilitating Listening Meetings.
3. A copy of the sheet, “Six reflection questions” (see next page) and a pen for everyone present at the Listening Time. The questions are available as a handout - [six reflection questions.pdf](#)
4. Depending on the numbers of people present and your acoustics, you may need a roving microphone or some microphones placed where people can easily approach them.
5. Someone who works with the facilitator as a capable note-taker to document what is shared.
6. Wherever small groups are used, paper and a pen needs to be provided for the scribes/note takers.



**Time required:** about 2 hours.

**Steps**



1. **Thank all those who have taken part** in any way and to those who have covenanted to do the *A Time for Change?* exercises and to those who have been praying for the pastor and his/her family throughout this time of discernment.

Remind people of the reason for the Listening Meeting: this discernment process is about us believing that God has a purpose for us and that God wants us to listen and join in that purpose. The original thinking behind a Baptist church meeting was that the gathered community listened



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for the voice of God and together discerned the mind of Christ – we are trying to recover that understanding in what we are doing here together.

Explain that this meeting may well be different from any other you have experienced, because we are going to just listen to each other – there will be no discussion; no debate. We will need to be quite disciplined, because we may want to disagree really strongly – but we won't, and the moderator will intervene if anyone does start to challenge another's views.

We are here with open ears and open hearts to discern any common themes and patterns in what people are saying. Initially we shall be asking to hear just from those who have covenanted to do the exercises, but when we begin drawing threads together at the end we will invite anyone to share what they have heard in the meeting.

2. **Hand out** the sheet, “*Six Reflection Questions*” and pens to everyone (the handout version of these questions is [six reflection questions.pdf](#)). Invite everyone to prepare for the listening time by reflecting quietly on these questions for a few minutes. The first two questions are for those who were unable to do the exercises and the next four are for those who did the exercises. You might like to jot down some responses in the silence, which might help you frame your responses in the bigger group. And anyone who doesn't feel able to speak aloud might want to give us their sheets at the end.

### ***Six Reflection Questions for a Listening Meeting***

1. *How do I best hear God in my life?*
2. *How do we hear God as a church community?*
3. *What impacted me most strongly in the exercises?*
4. *What did I learn about myself and my relationship with the church and the community?*
5. *What did I discern God saying about the future role of our pastoral leader?*
6. *Is there anything else you'd like to share with the group?*

You may also wish to offer an explanation about the meaning of listening to God. Suggest that we all find God in different ways – some may sense a voice in their heads, others will just let thoughts

**none of us can  
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our thinking  
together**

and feelings emerge in the quiet and trust that these may be the Spirit at work, some might see pictures or images, but none of us can be certain whether we hear the voice of God or not, which is why we need to share our thinking together, and see whether any of these hunches resonate with those of others. This is what scripture means by weighing or testing the word that is given to us.

Invite the group to be quiet while people work with the questions.

3. **Silence** (5 mins)

4. **Ask covenanted group** to share any responses under the four question headings, taking one question at a time. Depending on the size of the group, you will probably need about ten minutes for each question. Don't be concerned about periods of silence; this is a prayerful process. Also, don't be afraid to move people on if you sense that they have shared everything on any given question. Encourage people not to share lengthy reflections; rather encourage them to simply share what



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they experienced through the fortnight of prayerful exercises. Ensure that everything shared is carefully documented.

- 5. **Once people have responded** to all four questions, invite the community to return to two to three minutes of silence. Everyone in the group – both those who have done the exercises and those who haven't – is invited to quietly ponder all that has been shared within the Listening Time and to identify what they have heard that has "rung true" most clearly for them. It may be something that has been said by a number of people... or something said by just one which resonated deeply within them.
- 6. **Ask people to share** what they have heard within the group – whether there have been any common threads or things that have resonated deeply through the time.
- 7. **Conclude the Listening Time** by explaining the next phase of the process. All the documentation will be gathered and made available to all participants for further prayer and reflection. The Leadership Group will further reflect on the record of the Listening Time and then bring recommendations to a church meeting. Clearly communicate the date for the meeting.  
Thank everyone for taking part.
- 8. **Closing words.** If your Listening Time takes places as part of a worship service, you may like to conclude with a final song or benediction. If it has been a separate meeting, you may like to conclude the meeting in prayer.

**After the meeting,** the facilitator and/or notetaker brings together their notes of the things shared through the Listening Meeting and their collation of the Reflection Sheets and gives them to the church's leadership group. They may also be made available to the whole church on the following Sunday. Only then does the leadership group begin to shape a recommendation concerning a further term for the pastoral leader.

At an appropriate time, but normally within a fortnight of the Listening Meeting, a Church Meeting will consider the recommendation and make its discernment.

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## 6. Guidelines for facilitating a Listening Meeting... Renewing the Vision

*The aim is to move the community from listening to God individually through the "Renewing the Vision" prayerful listening exercises to listening to God together as a church in order to discern God's will for the church's future direction.*

### You will need

- 1. Clear communication of an invitation to a "listening meeting" for the whole church community.
- 2. A facilitator to guide the process. This may be someone from your own church community, although there is value in someone from outside your church doing this so that everyone can be involved. You may like to speak to your regional minister who has experience in facilitating Listening Meetings.
- 3. A copy of the sheet, "Five questions for refreshing what we have discovered" and a pen for everyone present at the Listening Time (see p.48). see [five questions for refreshing.pdf](#)





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4. Depending on the numbers of people present and your acoustics, you may need a roving microphone or some microphones placed where people can easily approach them.
5. Someone who works with the facilitator as a capable note-taker to document what is shared.
6. Wherever small groups are used, paper and a pen needs to be provided for the scribes/note takers.

**Time required:** about 2 hours.

## Preparation

It will be important to have prepared people well for the listening meeting. Preparation includes:

1. Clear communication about where and when the Listening Times will be held.
2. Many churches find it most helpful to adapt a morning worship service into a Listening Morning. This works well because the process of listening to God together is profoundly worshipful.

However, it does mean that many elements of your church's usual worship service will need to be omitted or reduced in length. Begin with about 20 minutes of focusing on God as a community: this may include some songs/hymns, a Bible Reading, community news, offering and prayer. Worship leaders will need to be disciplined with their time. Following the listening time – which will take between 60 and 90 minutes - conclude with a prayer, song and benediction.

3. Churches with up to about 80 attendees will be able to share in listening to God together process as one group. You will probably be able to do this in your usual worship space, although every opportunity to gather people so they can see one another will be beneficial. If your Listening Morning is likely to have more than 80 people present and participating, you will need to have provision to move into smaller groups. This will require flexible seating. If you are able, you may even want to rearrange the worship space so that people can gather in small groups around tables.



4. If you have Sunday School or Kids Club during your service, it may be beneficial to make special arrangements for the children of your church so that their teachers can participate in the Listening process. You may be able to ask some representatives of a nearby Baptist Church (with Working With Children's Checks) to come and facilitate a special morning's session.

5. You may also want to make provision for children who have done their own version of "Renewing the Vision" to be present at the start of the listening time to share what they want to say to the church.

6. It will be helpful to give people some advance notice that a Listening Morning may be unlike any other church meeting they have attended before. The process will be different but very gentle; nobody will be put on the spot. It will not be a forum for discussion or debate. The purpose will simply be to listen to what people have discovered during the "Renewing the Vision" fortnight of prayer and to begin to enquire as to what God might be saying among us.



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## Steps

After the twenty minutes of opening worship, it will be important to reiterate the purpose and the guidelines for the Listening Time.

1. **Thank everyone** for who has gathered and those who have covenanted to do the “Renewing the Vision” exercises.

**Remind** everyone that the discernment process is about believing that God has a purpose for the church and is inviting us to listen and join in that purpose. We are doing what Baptist Church communities have always been passionate about – meeting together to discern the mind of Christ.

**Remind** people that the purpose of this meeting is to listen to one another; there will be no decisions made, no discussion or debate. Everything that is said will be honoured as valuable. Acknowledge that this requires maturity and discipline. We may want to disagree really strongly, but we won't... and the facilitator will intervene if anyone does start to challenge another's views. Weighing what people have heard is vital, but comes later in the process.

You may like to add a comment about listening to God as a community. Here is one example of how you might do this...

*“There are different and valid ways in which we experience God’s word to us. Some may actually hear a voice audibly or in their heads. Others may identify the thoughts and feelings that arise in the quiet as the promptings of the Spirit. Some may feel inspired to see pictures or images. But none of us can always be certain that what we experience is the voice of God, which is why we need to share our discoveries together. We then trust the gathered wisdom of the community to listen to all that is said and discern together “what the Spirit is saying to the church”. This is what Scripture means by weighing or testing the word given to us.”*

2. It is important that people are able to refresh their awareness of what they have discovered during their prayer. To facilitate this, pass around the sheet, “Five questions for refreshing” (the version for printing the handout is [five questions for refreshing.pdf](#)).

Point out that those who have not done the “Renewing the Vision” exercises are to focus on questions 1 and 2. Invite those who have done the exercises to focus on questions 3 to 5. Allow five minutes of quietness for people to gently regather their most significant discoveries.

### Five questions for refreshing what we have discovered

1. How do I best hear God in my life?
2. How do we hear God as a church community?  
(If you are visiting this morning, you may like to think about another church community you know... or you may like to think generally about how groups you have been a part of have made significant decisions.)
3. What impacted me most through the “Renewing the Vision” exercises?
4. What did I learn about myself and my relationship with God, the church and the community?
5. What did I discern God saying about our church’s future direction?



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3. If you have children participating, this would be a good time to invite them to share what they would like to say to the church.
4. **(for 80 participants or less)** If there are less than 80 participants, you may now like to proceed as one group. The facilitator will invite those who have done the “Renewing the Vision” exercises to give brief, simple and honest responses to the following questions in turn...
  - *what impacted you most in the exercises?*
  - *what did you learn about yourself and your relationship with God, the church and the community?*
  - *what did you discern God saying about our church’s future direction?*

While only those who have done the “Renewing the Vision” exercises are invited to contribute to these 3 questions, everyone is encouraged to listen deeply whenever they are not speaking. This will become critical at STEP 5 (below).

Depending on the response of the group, you will need to allow some 10 to 15 minutes for each question. Don’t be afraid of silent pauses, but also don’t be afraid to move on if you sense that people have said all they want to say.

Keep encouraging people away from long speeches or complex arguments or from preaching sermons. The emphasis is on simple sharing of authentic experience. After each person has shared, invite a few moments of quiet to “hold what has been shared” before the next person speaks.

**Make sure that everything that is shared is documented/recorded.** That may mean that someone who is good at listening and capturing the essence of what is shared takes notes on a notepad or computer. If using a computer, don’t project the notes onto a screen as this can distract people from listening deeply. You can also ensure that everything is recorded by a tape or CD recording, but if this is done, we suggest only making the recording available to the facilitator or the person taking notes. Quite personal and intimate promptings of the Spirit may be shared within the sacred trust of the church which should not be shared widely within the general community.

4. **(with more than 80 participants)** In this situation, you may need to have made some additional preparations. The space in which you meet will need provision for people to gather into small groups: about 6 to 8 people per group is most desirable. As a “rule of thumb”, each group will need at least half of its participants to have done the “Renewing the Vision” exercises.

The small group process will probably go more smoothly if a group leader for each group has been briefed in advance. Each group will need to appoint someone who is trusted with documenting what is said.

The small group leader will invite those in their group who have done the “Renewing the Vision” exercises to give brief, simple and honest responses to the following questions in turn...

- *what impacted you most in the exercises?*
- *what did you learn about yourself and your relationship with God, the church and the community?*
- *what did you discern God saying about our church’s future direction?*

While only those who have done the “Renewing the Vision” exercises are invited to contribute to these three questions, everyone is encouraged to listen deeply whenever they are not speaking. This will become critical later.



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Depending on the response of the group, group leaders will need to allow 5 to 10 minutes for each question. Don't be afraid of silent pauses, but also don't be afraid to move on if you sense that people have said all they want to say.

Group leaders may need to keep encouraging people away from long speeches or complex arguments or from preaching sermons. It may also be important for group leaders to discourage informal discussion of people's contributions. The emphasis is on simple sharing of authentic experience. After each person has shared, invite a few moments of quiet to "hold what has been shared" before the next person speaks.

**Make sure that everything that is shared is documented/recorded** by the person taking notes for the group.

Once group responses have been made to all three questions, group leaders invite the group back to some moments of quiet prayer. Everyone in the group – both those who have done the exercises and those who haven't – is invited to quietly ponder all that has been shared within the group and to identify what they have heard within the group that has "rung true" most clearly for them. It may be something that has been said by a number of people... or something said by just one which resonated deeply within them.

After the silence, the group leader goes around the group and asks each group member to share what they have heard within the group. Once again, the group note-taker documents what is shared.

5. **(for 80 participants or less)** Once all three questions have been given adequate space and all responses have been documented, the facilitator will now invite the whole church community to return to 2 to 3 minutes of silent prayer.



**Encourage people not to be afraid to share simple things**

Everyone in the group – both those who have done the exercises and those who haven't – is invited to quietly ponder all that has been shared within the Listening Time and to identify what they have heard that has "rung true" most clearly for them. It may be something that has been said by a number of people... or something said by just one which resonated deeply within them.

After the silence, the facilitator asks people to share what they have heard God saying to the church. Once again, this is not an occasion for debate: just respectful listening and careful documentation. Encourage people not to be afraid to share simple things and continue to encourage people away from complex arguments or complicated theological pronouncements. Once again invite people to hold quietly for a few moments what has been shared before the next person speaks.

Once the community has come to silence again, it may be appropriate for the facilitator and/or the person taking notes to share what they have heard most clearly.

5. **(with more than 80 participants)** The facilitator will now invite the whole church community to share what has been heard most deeply through the morning.

The facilitator will invite the small groups to share what they have heard most strongly as they have listened together. Anyone may speak on behalf of their table, but it is important that they again be encouraged to speak briefly, simply and honestly about what they have heard. It will be important that the facilitator or someone else documents everything that is shared. Once again, this is not an occasion for debate: just respectful listening and careful documentation. Once again invite people to hold quietly for a few moments what has been shared before the next table speaks.



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Once the sharing has finished, encourage all tables to return the sheets on which their table conversations have been documented.

6. The facilitator concludes by thanking people and making clear the next steps in the process.
7. If the Listening Time has been conducted as part of a service, final prayers, a song and a benediction take place.

### After the Listening Meeting

Collate all the sharing that has been documented and prepare enough copies for everyone in the congregation. For this exercise, it is only necessary to record what has been said; not who said it. Nevertheless encourage the church to receive the document as confidential. This is not the daily news: this is a record of the community's listening to God. We are on sacred ground.

It is very important that this record of the Listening Morning is read carefully and prayerfully by each member of the church's leadership group. At the following leadership group meeting, it will be important for the church's leadership group to spend a good deal of its time deepening its listening to what God has been saying to the church.

The product of the leadership team's discernment based on the material of the Listening Meeting may take various forms...

1. Some clear recommendations about future direction may emerge.
2. Some broad areas of future direction may be emerging, but they may require further development. The leadership group may call some small working groups together to further research some options.
3. It may be important to follow up some broad directions with work toward a clear strategic plan.
4. The leadership group may decide to refer the directions it has distilled to the church's various ministry groups for the development of some clear future goals.

Whatever directions are discerned by the leadership group need to be clearly communicated to the church. Given that the directions have come from the church's discernment of God's voice, it will be important that the church recognise and affirm the recommendations and suggestions coming from the leadership group. An affirmation from a church meeting would be one clear way for this to be expressed.

*At all points in the process, the church's regional minister would be happy to work with the church and its leadership team.*

**This is not the daily news:  
this is a record of the community's listening  
to God. We are on sacred ground.**



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# CREATIVE DECISIONS



*The previous section outlined some different ways of approaching church meetings which enable church communities to meet in ways that are prayerful, inclusive and community building.*

*The focus of this section is on practices and skills that can help meetings to move toward decisions without marginalising people who do not share the majority voice. It starts with a brief contrast between majority voting and consensus and then outlines some “tried and true” methods of helping a community to move toward decision without the “winners” and “losers” of a majority vote.*

## 1. VOTING AND CONSENSUS

Consensus decision making is a process through which an entire group of people can come to agreement. It honours the fact that the Spirit of God is in every believer and the community risks limiting its vision of God’s leading if convictions are silenced or people’s sense of God’s leading is set aside. Consensus voting generates a different dynamic among participants than “majority voting” because people are encouraged to seek out those who disagree with them to attempt to understand their position and arrive at a situation where both participants are “winners”. With “majority-voting” competing factions will often try to win converts and even though there will be debate about the issue the numbers will be the deciding factor. The end result of the process inevitably leaves some participants as “losers”.

**consensus  
decision-making  
promotes the trust  
and growth of the  
community**

By using a consensus model all participants are able to feel that they are a part of the final decision. Their ideas and input are gathered and valued as a part of the decision making process. By consensus decision-making we promote the trust and growth of the community.

Groups that use consensus as a means of deciding issues may use other forms of decision making when appropriate but when an issue is about faith, values or is likely to cause emotion they will always look for consensus on the issue.

Consensus does not mean that everyone thinks that the decision made is necessarily the best one possible, or even that they are sure it will work. But as a process it values individuals and their contribution and can lead the community to a quality of decision that not even the most enlightened individual or leadership group would have managed on their own.



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## 2. PRACTICES TO FACILITATE COMMUNITY CONSENSUS

### Taking soundings

Taking soundings during a community decision-making process enables a clear awareness as to where people are at or how they are feeling about an issue. This can be an especially beneficial process when you are uncertain as to the strength of feelings or opinions, or exactly how many people might support one particular point of view or another.

It also enables discussion to take place rather than a polarisation into 'for' and 'against' camps with no room for middle ground or compromise. The invitation is for the meeting to hold back on forming a final decision until all voices are heard and a reasonable amount of time is given to those wanting to express their point of view on the particular issue.

#### 1. A straw vote

A show of hands, or some other method of determination, may be used at stages of the debate to find out how people are currently feeling about a proposal that is being considered. This must not be seen as a final vote – it is an interim sounding of the community's current sense of God's leading. This brief and simple exercise has a number of benefits:

- it recognises that sometimes consensus is reached by a group without knowing it. A unanimous show of hands can indicate that the community is ready to make the decision.
- It may indicate that there is a small minority still unsure of the merit of a proposal. The meeting can then focus on the concerns of those who are still unsettled, not to pressure them to premature agreement, but to listen to their concerns and respectfully find a way forward. It might be a good time to ask what might be necessary to help them to embrace the proposal.
- It may indicate that the community is still a long way from agreement. This can then lead to exploring new questions: Is the proposal clear? Do we have enough information to make this decision? Is there more research that needs to be done? Are we addressing the right question? Are there some other issues that are at play in community life that are preventing us from gaining clarity?

#### 2. A spectrum exercise

If a church is wrestling with an issue, it can be helpful to put up two signs at either end of a room.

- I am wholly in favour of this
- I am wholly opposed to this

You explain that this is the spectrum of opinion in the church about this issue and you ask people to go and stand at the point on the imaginary line that best describes how they are feeling about the issue at this moment.

It is important that you explain that the aim of this exercise is to help us all move our positions as we listen to others, so where we begin on the line, will not be where we end up.

So if I'm completely undecided, I might go and stand in the middle, or if I'm fairly warm about the idea, but have just a few questions or reservations, I will go and stand nearer to the 'Wholly in favour' sign.

Once people have located themselves somewhere on the line they are invited to talk to those around them, and hear what each other is saying. Again encourage them to move if they are more or less in favour than those they talk to.



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After about 5-10 mins, ask people to be quiet and then invite some comments from different parts of the spectrum. Why are people standing where they are, and what might they need in order to move towards or away from the proposal?

It is important that we all listen carefully to each other, because after listening we will be invited to shift our position again.

If questions are raised along the line these should be noted, and if they can be answered by those present, this should happen, but it may be that the questions need answers that will require further research. If so, it may become clear that the community is not yet ready to make a decision.

People are invited to change their place on the line in the light of what they have heard, and everyone is able to see whether or not there is a clear grouping of people at any one place on the line. If people are still very spread out, it will be demonstrably clear that there is no consensus as yet in the community, and more work needs to be done.

**3. Traffic Light Cards**

Three pieces of coloured pieces of card are distributed to every person at the meeting. These can be anywhere between A4 and A5 in size, as long as they are large enough to be clearly visible. The colours red, green and amber/orange represent three perspectives:

Red = I do not agree at all

Amber = I am not sure/I have a question that I need answered

Green = I agree

At any point in the discussion, the chairperson can ask for a show of cards when he/she or the meeting wants to know where people are at in terms of the question being considered. A clear showing of green cards would indicate that there is a positive response and likewise a large number of red cards would indicate a negative response.

This process enables the identification of those who have questions or who require clarification before they can clearly respond yes or no.

As each question is put to the group, those who have raised their Amber cards can be invited to ask for clarification or voice their objection/opinion. It's important for people to feel that they can be heard and understood without any kind of pressure or pre-judging.

The goal is to come to a place where there are no more Amber cards raised and there is a clear sense of where a meeting stands on the issue.

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## 3. WHEN CONSENSUS IS NOT REACHED



Sometimes it is not possible to reach consensus on an issue. If that happens there are a number of ways for people to indicate their dissent:

1. **Reservations:** *“I am personally unconvinced but will support the decision if the majority feel it is right”*

This position indicates both a respect for the person’s own convictions, and at the same a desire not to hold the community back from something it clearly senses as the leading of God. It also indicates a willingness to participate as the community puts the decision into practice.

2. **Standing Aside:** *“I personally cannot support this, but I won’t stop others from doing it.”*

This position is like the first, but it adds the statement that while not blocking the community from the decision, the person does not feel able to support its implementation.

3. **Blocking:** *“I cannot support this or allow the group to support this.”*

Here the strongest form of dissenting conviction prevents the community from moving to a consensus decision.

Where “reservations” or “standing aside” are indicated, the community needs to decide whether it is the right time to proceed to concluding its decision or whether it wants to hold the issue open to allow further time for conversation. Where there is “blocking”, clearly consensus has not been reached.

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## 4. MOVING FORWARD WHEN THERE IS NO CONSENSUS



*Rwandese men taking part in the community justice system - gacaca.*

*It is important to recognise that coming to this point does not mean that consensus has failed. It does mean that the issue before the church is a complex one and that more time is required to reach a decision.*

At this point, there is a further range of practices which can be used...

### Small groups

Small groups can be used to further develop the conversation. It is important that they are not used to pressure those with dissenting convictions or to rehash old arguments. But they can be given a particular focus. It could be helpful to ask small groups to consider:

- one particular aspect of the question that appears to be at the core of people's concerns.
- a particular Bible passage that may throw light on the issue.
- sharing personally and prayerfully what is at stake for them in the issue before the community. What are their deepest hopes for this proposal? What are their fears? When people move from hearing opinions to hearing one another's spirits, they are often drawn to wanting to find a way forward together.

### One-on-ones

As a way of ensuring that everyone is heard in a group it could be good to have a time when people divide into couples and each couple engages a 'speaking/listening' exercise. That is, one person speaks for a certain time while the other listens; roles are then reversed. The time given to each person to share can be allocated according to the topic under discussion with the facilitator indicating when it is time to change roles.

### Creative spaces: silence, music and poetry

These are all ways to create a silent space for reflection. Their use needs to be explained by the facilitator so they are not seen as an attempt to 'silence' people but rather as part of a process of helping communication.

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## Time Out

The aim is to provide a simple method that allows any meeting to listen to God together. It can be used following a Bible Reading to help the community to hear what God is saying. It can be used in a decision-making meeting, especially when the meeting has become bogged down in a complex or conflicted situation.

**Time:** depending on the size of the group, this may only require about 30 minutes.

**You will need:** only a leader who can guide the group and a group that is willing to be open to God together.



## Steps

1. **The leader/facilitator begins with an invitation** to the group to move into a time of silence together. How long the period of silence lasts for depends on the context and the experience of the group. Because periods of silence together are not common for many of us, two to three minutes is suggested at first.

If the silence is to begin a meeting, you might ask people to become conscious of how they are feeling as they gather and how they imagine God might receive them as they open themselves to God's presence.

If the silence follows a reading or meditation, you might invite people to allow the words to settle within them and to notice any verse or word or phrase that stays with them.

If it is in the context of a decision-making meeting in which we need some time-out, you might invite people to relax for a few moments and then to gently ponder what they have heard during the meeting – either spoken aloud, or through hearing the deep stirring within themselves – that most has the “ring of truth” for them.

If it is at the end of a meeting or at the end of a tough issue, you might ask people to ponder what they think God may be wanting to say to the church through the time they have spent together.





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2. **Following the silence, the leader offers a simple one-sentence prayer** for guidance or thanks for God's presence. Then the leader invites the group to share what they have heard in the silence, explaining that there will be no debate or discussion after each person's contribution and that nobody is obligated to speak; people may simply say "pass" if they wish. While someone is speaking, the rest of the group is encouraged to preserve the sense of deep listening and attentiveness to what God may be saying to the group.

If it is a small group – a leadership group, cell group, prayer group or ministry group – the leader invites people to go around the circle and speak in turn.

If it is a larger group – e.g. a church meeting – the leader makes a general invitation for people to share what they have heard in the silence, but not expect to hear from everyone. In these circumstances, it may be wise to make provision for written communication for those who feel unable to speak into a large group. An alternative in a large group is to invite people to form small groups – e.g. five people – and simply share without discussion what each member has heard. This can be sufficient if the purpose of the exercise is to help people to gather or to share what has happened for them within a meeting. However, if the purpose is to help a community to listen together as part of a community-wide discernment process, it will be necessary to have a secondary phase of communal listening in which the small groups are invited to share with the whole community any things they have heard together. It is possible to do this, but it also risks losing some important individual insights in the "group distilling" of what has been shared.



3. **Particularly if the communal listening is part of a decision-making process**, the leader will ask the group to share what they have heard together. The invitation is not for individuals to restate what they have heard individually, but to distill what we have all heard within the group. It can sometimes help to have some supportive questions like:

- What were the common themes in our sharing – what did we hear from more than one person?
- What did we hear from one another that struck us with deeper impact?
- What are the things that still seem unclear to us as a group?

4. At this point, it may be helpful for the leader to summarise back to the group what has been heard. This then leads to a conversation about what the next step may be. It is not uncommon at this point for some renewed clarity to enable the group to formulate a united resolution. There are other times when some things have been clarified, but convictions remain diverse on others. The conversation may then turn to waiting – and how we live with and support one another in the waiting.

## Fishbowl

In a group which is divided, a process known as fishbowl helps to make particular positions clear to all. A few people, particularly those who feel strongest about an issue, sit down together in the middle of the group and hash things out freely for a designated period of time while the group observes them. No decisions are made but the process allows those observing to understand the issues and sometimes a new way forward will emerge.



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## Story Telling Circle

This is a creative, playful and prayerful approach to help a community find new insight and clarity together when a complex issue has got them bogged down. It is ideally suited to a small group of 5 to 12 people and thus a helpful activity for a leadership or ministry group when it is working with an issue it is finding hard to resolve.

It can be used in a number of ways.

- the whole group forms a circle
- a representative group gathers in the middle of the room with the rest of the community gathered around them to observe and to comment at the end of the exercise (as in the Fishbowl exercise)
- alternatively, the community could be divided into a number of circles; however each will require an experienced facilitator

**Time:** depending on the size of the group, 45 minutes to an hour is required.

**You will need:** a facilitator. It is important that the facilitator focuses entirely on facilitating the process and does not try to influence the outcome. The facilitator will need a Bible and some flip chart paper and a good writing texta. Group members will not need anything in their hands at all.

## Process

1. The facilitator organises the group to be seated in a circle. Participants will not need any books or pens. The facilitator will position herself/himself within the circle, but with access to a flipchart just behind them.
2. The facilitator will then invite the group to share together in telling the story of the situation that has got them bogged down or is causing them difficulty. The person on the left of the facilitator will begin the story: however, they must begin by starting "Once upon a time..." and only



completing one sentence. For example: "Once upon a time, there was a church that had an underused block of land at the back of its property." Or "Once upon a time a church dreamed of providing shelter for a homeless couple."

3. Moving clockwise around the circle, the second person continues the story, beginning with a linking phrase like "And then..." or "But before that..." and similarly contributing one sentence. The third person proceeds in the same way as the second, using a linking phrase and offering one sentence. In this way the story continues to develop as it makes its way around the circle. Notice that each participant in the story is able to offer their sentence from their own perspective, so that the story can be told with all of its different variations and perspectives. Group members may pass at any time, and the person on their left will take up the story. It is important that group members listen to the story as it develops and not be too preoccupied with crafting their next contribution!

4. The story doesn't stop at the end of the first time around the circle but continues. Once the last person in the circle (to the right of the facilitator) has offered their sentence, the person who started the story continues the story as the circle begins its second time around. (Notice that the facilitator does not participate in the telling of the story.) The story telling, one sentence at a time,



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continues around the circle as many times as needed. When the facilitator is satisfied that the major elements of the story have been adequately told, he/she will indicate the final time around the circle.

- At the end of the story, the facilitator then asks the group, “As you think about the story you have just told, are there any verses or stories or passages from the Bible that come to mind that may illuminate our situation?” As participants offer suggestions, the facilitator lists them on the flipchart. As she/he does so, the facilitator will make sure that each group member is generally familiar with each passage that is suggested.



- Once a list is assembled, the facilitator will ask each group member to identify which passage they think would be most helpful to consider more deeply. The one that has the most “votes” is then identified.
- The facilitator then locates the identified passage. If it’s a very long passage, the facilitator may suggest to the group reading the most relevant section of it: a passage no more than 8 to 10 verses is best. The facilitator then reads the chosen passage slowly to the group, while group members listen quietly and prayerfully.

- The facilitator then reads the passage a second time, but pauses at the end of each verse or sentence. During each pause, group members are invited to make brief comments about the

## The sharing of story moves people beyond familiar arguments.

verse or sentence that has just been read; these are not so much bible study observations as things that come to their attention as evoking emotion, or with the discovery of renewed insight or meaning. The facilitator ensures that group member’s offerings are not discussed or debated at this time; they are simply held within the group’s opening of itself to God.

- Once the last verse of the identified passage has been read and responses offered, the facilitator will read the whole passage through one last time and then offer a brief pause for quiet reflection to the group.
- The facilitator then asks group members to think back to the story they told earlier. Has listening and reflecting on the Bible passage together offered group members any new ideas or insights for their story? Are there any themes in the Bible story that seem to speak to their story? As group members offer suggestions, the facilitator will write these on the flip chart.



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11. The facilitator will then ask the group to identify the implications of what they have discovered together. Has anything become clearer? Is there further work that needs to be done? What are the next steps?
12. If this is a decision-making group, the group may then wish to proceed toward recommendations or suggestions for further action.
13. The circle concludes with a prayer.

**Benefits**

There are a number of features of a “story-telling circle” that can make it a powerful experience for a group...

- The experience of telling the story together adds a sense of cohesion to the group: this is our story and we share in it together.
- It also enables people to hear people’s different perspectives in a non-judgmental setting.
- The sharing of story – especially in one sentence increments - moves people beyond mounting familiar arguments.
- The pondering of Bible passages that may illuminate the situation moves people’s attention beyond their own situation to embrace the broader story of God’s work in the world.
- The listening together – and hearing one another’s connections – creates the sense that the group is working together toward a shared outcome.
- Inviting the group to hold their story and the Bible passage together can help the group to name new ideas and discoveries they have shared together. This is not an argumentative process: the group is working together to open itself to God.

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## 5. Discernment as a way of life



Discernment is talked about a lot in this resource because we see it as a whole of life thing. It is not just a matter of knowing what is right in a particular circumstance but rather an attitude to spiritual growth that sees the expansion of our understanding of life as a wider opportunity for God to show us new things.

A good understanding of the scriptures is just one aspect of discernment. We also need an appropriate understanding of the world in which we live and work. Both can only come as a result of understanding that “God has more light and truth” to show to us.

We believe that we have to resolve to continue learning. Learning about God’s word, learning about the world in which we exist and learning about each other. So we have put together a Resolve that you might think about adopting for yourself and your congregation.

### Resolve

*We make these resolves in trust that we will continue to be open to the promptings of God’s Spirit.*

**We resolve to put prayer at the heart of all we do.** We will make the time and space for sitting at God’s feet and listening for God’s voice.

**We resolve to seek to understand God’s interaction with the world and adjust ourselves to it.** We will seek to see God’s activity around us by listening to our local and global community, and move to where God is already at work. We seek to follow Christ, not simply ask Jesus to bless our initiatives.

**We resolve that all matters must be subjected to the truth contained in Scripture.** We seek to be a community of the living word- willing to wrestle with difficult passages and new insights.

**We resolve that ministry is more important than meetings.** Priority will always be given to developing relationships, meeting needs and healing hurts through the ministries and people of our congregation.



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### **We resolve to seek spiritual growth and maturity within the church membership.**

We must be prepared to lead the way in pursuing spiritual maturity, serving where God has gifted us, and leading the way in modelling a life of worship, mission, community service and discipleship.

**We resolve in all our interaction to seek grace and to show grace.** Graciousness is the gift of respect, forgiveness, and acceptance that we offer each other. We offer graciousness when we seek to understand others before judging them.

*These principles are a covenant I make with each member of our congregation and my prayer is that you will pray for me as I seek to follow God and grow in Christ, and I pray you will lovingly hold me accountable for this covenant I make with you this day.*





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# CREATIVE THINKING

## ENCOURAGING CREATIVITY IN BEING OPEN TO GOD



*Throughout this resource we have been trying to help congregations to be more open to God. It can be really helpful to use methods that are less cerebral to get groups thinking differently. God has gifted people with very different outlooks and approaches to life. Some operate far better in a visual mode. Others are not linear thinkers, and tend to frustrate others who are used to working in a very logical order. By using a variety of methods, we can be both inclusive of different voices, and hopefully assist others to be open to new possibilities.*

### Six ways to generate ideas when thinking about vision and direction in church life



1. Hand out some blank sheets of paper and some pens. Ask people not to use words but to draw some images of how God might like to see the church functioning. Give people five minutes. It doesn't matter about the quality of the drawing; using images helps us to connect with different parts of our brain, and can add a richness to our reflection.
2. Hand out balls of plasticine or playdoh, and ask people to think about the question: if our church was an animal what sort of animal would it be? And ask them to model their idea in the plasticine (Give no more than five minutes). Let people talk briefly about why they made what they did, and then ask them to model the kind of animal God might be calling us to be, (allow another five minutes) and let those models become the focus of the discussion.



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3. Hand out sheets of blank paper and pens. Ask people to draw the shape of a large grave stone in the middle of the page. Then ask the question “If our church were to die and disappear tomorrow, what do you think that people around us in the community would write in our obituary? Would we be missed?” write some of these things on the gravestone. (Allow five minutes) Now around the edge of the gravestone, what would you like people to be saying about us?

Share your ideas together and see if the differences, between the reality and the dreams, help set an agenda for our mission or a direction for our future.

4. Prepare a set of 8-10 cards. Write on the back of each one an aspect of ministry in the church, such as worship, leadership, youth, community involvement, justice issues, prayer etc. and lay them face down on the table. Ask people to pick one up at random and give them 5-10 mins to jot down some of their dreams about our church life in that particular area. “When I think about this area, I have dreams about...”

Then share the ideas and encourage discussion around each one. You will need to watch the timing so that everyone gets a chance to speak.

The advantage of this exercise is that we get to hear perspectives which might be very different from those who usually focus on these areas.

5. Purchase a pack of photographic images from St Lukes Innovative Resources [www.innovativeresources.org](http://www.innovativeresources.org) and lay these out on the floor or a large table. Ask people to select the image that most appeals to them when asked to consider a particular question. Questions might be...

- which image best conveys what I enjoy most about being part of a church community?
- choose an image that expresses God’s invitation to move on as a church.
- choose an image which expresses the fullness of life God wants for us all.

People are then invited to get into small groups and talk with each other about the reasons for their choices, and see if there are any common themes emerging about what are some of the motivating values and life-giving themes for the church.

6. Story-telling. In a comfortable environment, encourage people to think about the stories of events that they feel most proud of in the life of the church.

Ask people to tell the stories from different eras of the church’s history. What do we remember most fondly? What do we celebrate because it most closely accords with what we feel church is all about?

This is not a visualisation exercise, but helps a congregation get in touch with what it really cares about and what it believes is the essence of its being. The facilitator will need to gently draw out the learnings as he or she encourages the group to identify common themes in the stories and to reflect on the deeper values that are being expressed.

## Thinking Hats

*Aims to offer a better way for groups to think through an issue.*

Early in the 1980s Dr. Edward de Bono invented the Six Thinking Hats framework for thinking. The method promotes fuller input from more people. In de Bono’s words it “separates ego from



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performance". Everyone is able to contribute to the exploration without denting egos as they are 'just using a particular hat'. People can contribute under any hat even though they initially support the opposite view. This helps everyone to begin to think in different ways about a topic and stops groups getting stuck in well-worn ruts or in polarised groups.

Six Thinking Hats is widely used in schools, industry and commerce due to its simplicity and effectiveness. An important aspect of the Six Thinking Hats technique is that by its discipline it avoids adversarial discussion. Even when there may be vast differences in opinion it allows for these considerations to be 'laid out in parallel' so that a creative consensus can be reached.

The aim is to get everyone using the same type of thinking at the same time, instead of a jumble of ideas. The Six Hats method therefore requires an orderly use of the hats. It is no use mixing all the hats up together, there is a time for each type of thinking or hat in the structure of the discussion.

### The discipline in Six Hats.

The Six Thinking Hats technique is used in meetings, conversations and discussions. It is ideal for leadership teams of up to fifteen people.

Time is allotted for each of the hats. If too much time is allowed, attention will tend to wander. As people become familiar with the technique the time allowed for each hat can be shortened. If necessary switch thinking abruptly to the next hat. Time discipline is part of thinking discipline. One must become accustomed to switching thinking at will and in a controlled manner instead of drifting along.

There are six metaphorical hats that the thinker can 'put on' or 'take off' to indicate the type of thinking being used. This putting on and taking off is essential. The hats should not be used to categorize individuals, or their typical ways of thinking. When done in a group, everybody 'wears' the same hat at the same time.

### The Six/Seven Thinking Hats



*When you first start using the process, you'll probably want to refer to this summary. It is also available on the disk as a PDF for printing at A4 or A3 size. See [thinking hats A4.pdf](#) or [thinking hats A3.pdf](#)*

*Although not part of de Bono's original scheme, a Purple Hat can be added to give opportunity for people to contribute biblical or theological perspectives on any given issue.*



#### White Hat thinking

*Facts, figures, information.* Have we got all the relevant information? Where can we get more information? White is neutral – pure facts and figures.



#### Red Hat thinking

*Feelings, hunches and intuition.* Gives a person permission to put forward a hunch or a feeling without needing to justify it.



#### Black Hat thinking

*Judgment, caution and why something may not work.* It is not an inferior or negative hat. It is used to point out why an idea may not fit the facts or the available experience, or the system or policy that is being followed. The black hat must always be logical.

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### Yellow Hat thinking

*The good points. Why something will work.* The logical positive, the optimistic. The benefits of some proposed action, but also the value in what has already happened. It creates concrete proposals and permits visions and dreams but may need effort and practice to avoid 'going over the top'!



### Green Hat thinking

*Creativity, new and interesting ideas.* Thinking 'outside the square'. Innovative proposals, alternatives and changes.



### Blue Hat thinking

*For managing the thinking process.* The blue hat evaluates how well all the angles are being covered. It doesn't look at the subject itself, but at the 'thinking about' the subject. The facilitator will usually wear the blue hat. "Putting on my blue hat, I feel we should do some more green hat thinking at this point."



### Purple Hat thinking

*Relevant biblical perspectives.* This gives opportunity for church groups to think theologically about an issue. With this hat on, we are invited to consider what scriptures come to mind when considering this issue. Are there any theological motifs that seem relevant, for example *dying in order to be re-born... or going the second mile?*

## The systematic use...

Here the hats are used in sequence, to quickly explore a subject in some depth. Each hat may be used as many times as required. The sequence of hats may be planned in advance or may be worked out as the meeting progresses.

## Use in meetings...

Using the Six Hats method, meetings can become more productive and focused. The hats often give people the freedom to find a greater variety of viewpoints, rather than simply defend a familiar position.

It's important that everyone tries to use the designated hat. If a group is doing 'yellow hat thinking' for example, then *everyone* should try to find the positives, not just the supporters of the idea.

Rather than waiting for contributions, sometimes it may be necessary to go round the group and ask individuals for their thinking under the current hat. Everyone should make an effort to think *in parallel* for a co-operative exploration of the subject.

The facilitator, the chairperson or person organising the meeting will usually wear the blue hat. Others can make blue hat suggestions and ask for summaries etc. With the exception of the blue hat, individuals should not interrupt an idea or say "putting on my black hat...". Thinkers must stick to the designated hat.

If a thought comes to mind that would fit under a *different* hat, discard that thought. Don't even make a note of it, otherwise you will be just *classifying* thoughts, rather than engaging creatively in some focused lateral thinking!

There should be no disagreements or contradictions during the use of the hats. If there is a different point of view it must be 'laid alongside' the original point of view.

## For more information

There are many books that give more detail on using this method as well as many internet sites with helpful information on exploring it further. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/De\\_Bono\\_Hats](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_Bono_Hats)

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## FOR FURTHER READING



### Books

Margaret Benefiel, *Soul At Work – Spiritual Leadership in Organisations*, (Veritas, Dublin, 2005)

Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, Susan M. Ward, *Listening Hearts – Discerning Call in Community* (rev.), (Morehouse, Harrisburg, 2007)

Suzanne G. Farnham, Stephanie A. Hull, R. Taylor McLean, *Grounded In God – Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations* (rev.), (Morehouse, Harrisburg, 1999)

Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together – A Spiritual Practice for the Church*, (Alban, Bethesda, 1997)

Barry Morley, *Beyond Consensus – Salvaging the Sense of the Meeting*, (Pendle Hill, Wallingford, 1993)

Charles M. Olsen, *Transforming Church Boards – into communities of spiritual leaders*, (Alban, Herndon, 1995)

Andrew Woff, *Spiritual Direction of Faith Communities - Exploring some pathways for churches and their leadership and ministry groups to "listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches"* (rev.), unpublished research essay, available through The WellSpring Centre Spiritual Direction Library, 2009

### Web links

Geoff Pound's series of small group studies on discernment.  
<http://makinglifedecisions.blogspot.com>

Robert's Rules/Consensus Comparison.  
[www.earlham.edu/~consense/rocomp.shtml](http://www.earlham.edu/~consense/rocomp.shtml)

Consensus for Small Groups An introduction and worksheets  
[www.innatenonviolence.org/old/workshops/consensus4.htm](http://www.innatenonviolence.org/old/workshops/consensus4.htm)

Creative resources from St Lukes Innovative Resources  
[www.innovativeresources.org](http://www.innovativeresources.org)

De Bono's Thinking Hats  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/De\\_Bono\\_Hats](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_Bono_Hats)

Graphic design and photography by David Fullerton  
[www.davidfullerton.com.au](http://www.davidfullerton.com.au)

