



Listening & Discerning on the Way

A theological note

Why are we engaging together in this discernment process?

This discernment process is rooted in our understanding of the mission of God, known around the world today as the 'Missio Dei.' This is the idea that all mission is God's mission. Indeed God is a 'fountain of sending love' (David Bosch) pouring Godself out in redeeming love to the world in Christ and through the Spirit.

It follows that our task is to join in with what God is doing. It is not, as has famously been said, that 'the Church of God has a mission, rather than the God of mission has a Church.' The call is to engage with God's movement, not to baptise our own good ideas.

This powerful idea makes a great deal of sense in our culture today. Long gone are the days of Christendom when the culture itself (to use a metaphor of George Lings) rolled people into church. Now the culture tends to roll people away! Yet there are times when we can plainly see God at work – not just in the Church, but in the wider world.

In this context, our first task is to notice what God is up to – the task of discernment. Otherwise, if we don't practise this how can we join in? So, the process we are offering is, first and foremost, a spiritual one. How is God moving? How is the Spirit working at the moment? What might God be up to? Yes, among us, the Church – but also wider than that, around us in the world God loves so much?

So that's the theology behind this process. Theology is indeed always about who God is, and what God does. You may like to stop reading here, but if you want to think more about the nature of discernment, read on for some more theological markers.

God is Trinity

This means that God is God in relationship. The three Persons are one and undivided, yet wholly themselves in what has been described as a dance of mutual indwelling love. Yet this love is poured out towards the world. It follows that mission is always God's mission and therefore always about relationship. In our diocese's Missional Learning Communities we speak of spotting God's movement in people and through the relationships we intentionally form with them. We then put that into words, so that others may notice this too.





Discernment means noticing God's movement in the world

It can be helpful if we think of the Trinity as:

God the Father, our Creator: Where do we notice creativity or care within the Church but also beyond it? Are we noticing anything which reminds us of the Father's compassion, creativity and love?

God the Son, our Redeemer: Where do we notice people or movements which remind us of Jesus – his saving, healing, redeeming work? Where do we notice a love which is costly or sacrificial, a love with echoes of that love stronger than death?

God the Holy Spirit, our Life Giver: Where do we see evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in the world beyond the Church, the vitality of the Spirit, the connection and recognition that the Spirit enables?

Those who are interested will think more on these matters with the kind of 'holy pondering' which Luke attributes to Mary when she notices God's movement. JV Taylor's much referenced 'The Go-Between God' (SCM, 1972) traces the movement of the Spirit in human relationships through awareness, communication and vitality: "The Holy Spirit is the invisible third party who stands between me and the other, making us mutually aware."

Discernment means noticing God's movement - and putting it into words

More recently, Steven Guthrie, in 'Creator Spirit – the Holy Spirit and the art of becoming human' (Baker, 2011) has argued that discernment of the Spirit's movement is no less than 'the human vocation.' Such discernment is 'responsive', by which he refers to the kind of noticing we have been describing here. It is also 'creative', which means that we are to name and articulate what we notice of the Spirit's movement, and ultimately to act on that.

The act of putting into words what we are noticing of God's movement and telling another is crucial. A key Missional Learning Community and Changing Lives Conversations principle is that we do not learn through experience alone, rather we learn when we put our experience into words and tell someone else. Somehow the process of telling another leads to sharper discernment and to a sense of shared delight, even a sense of the presence of God with us.

This is the kind of focused, godly conversation which Bishop Rose is inviting our diocese towards. Such noticing and speaking is what we call discernment:





Thus says the Lord,
 who makes a way in the sea,
 a path in the mighty waters...
Do not remember the former things,
 or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
 now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
 and rivers in the desert.
The wild animals will honour me,
 the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
 rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.
[Isaiah 43.16 and 18 – 21, NRSV](#)

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P.S. If you are interested in the question, "Why engage in this process now?" see the article [‘A kairos moment for the Church’](#).

