

Frequently asked Questions about the individual's part in group discernment

excerpts from *Practicing Discernment Together: Finding God's Way Forward in Decision Making*,
Lon Fendall, Jan Wood, & Bruce Bishop. Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2007.

1. How do we deal with fear in the discernment process? We know that “perfect love drives out fear,” as the apostle John put it (I John 4: 18). But the problem is that our love is not always perfect. Our humanness takes over and we become fearful of the consequences of decisions.

Fear can actually be a helpful emotion to keep us from embracing foolish proposals. A number of Christian organizations have lost large amounts of money by placing their trust in dishonest individuals who offered lavish returns from shaky investment schemes. Their leaders needed to exercise more skepticism and greater fear that something too good to be true may be neither good nor true.

Disabling fear of the unknown, however, is the kind that kept the Hebrews wandering in the desert for 40 years. They felt afraid of the enemy's armies and they forgot God's many assurances that God would protect them and bring them safely to their destination.

Christian organizations face the unknown many times. It may be a change of leadership, a funding shortfall, or a change in circumstances that requires a different strategy of ministry. As individuals participating in the discernment process, we must name the group's fears and point to the many promises in Scripture, such as: “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:10).

2. How does anger affect group discernment? Some people have an internal thermostat that goes up rapidly and visibly when they get angry. Their neck and face become red and in extreme cases the whole body begins shaking. Those around them have to find a way to defuse the situation or simply let the person vent before the discussion can proceed.

Most of us aren't afflicted with such a short fuse. But if we were honest, we would admit that others do and say things that make us angry. Anger can be a helpful emotion. It signals that something isn't what you wanted or needed.

Anger needs to be acknowledged and listened to. It holds important information. But once its message has been delivered, we are wise to release the angry feelings that brought the issue to our attention. If we hold and give fuel to the angry feelings, those feelings cloud our judgment, stand in the way of our hearing what others are saying, and prevent us from understanding the validity of others' feelings. As we are taught in James 1: 19-20, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”

The apostle Paul wrote to the believers at Corinth that he felt afraid when he came to visit them. He feared that he would find them engaging in “quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder” (2 Corinthians 12:20).

Our first responsibility in the group discernment process is to seek the Lord's help in refraining from outbursts of anger. For some this is very difficult because they feel passionate

about certain issues. Others rarely become angry in a discussion, but even those people can lose their composure in certain situations—a process similar to the effect of a catalyst in a chemical reaction.

It is also our responsibility in discernment meetings to pray for those swept up in anger and to find ways to affirm the concern they feel and to translate angry words into more constructive thoughts. This is a great favor to people who let their anger get them off track. It allows the valid thoughts behind the feelings to claim their rightful place in the discourse.

On one occasion, some participants in a church business meeting found themselves unable to channel their emotions constructively. It appeared to one person that the group was headed in an inappropriate direction, and that person gathered up his things and hurried out of the room, slamming the door behind him. The clerk tried to keep the focus on discerning God's leading, but the unconstructive behavior made it difficult. We must not let our passion for a particular outcome get in the way of listening to God and to those speaking God's truth.

6. Is it always necessary to express our opposition to a proposal? There are times when one may feel led to say nothing, even when one does not support a proposed action. It may be that the wisdom of the group's action will become more apparent in the future. At other times an individual concludes that his or her misgivings are matters of preference rather than conviction.

Being led not to express one's opposition in the meeting rules out the option of later expressing this opposition and questioning the appropriateness of the group's action. Too many times discussions take place in the parking lot after decisions are made. This kind of second-guessing of decisions harms the group.

7. What if a person feels led to express his or her opposition to an action that is about to be taken? Sometimes an individual senses the need to express a deep hesitation about a planned action. In a voting situation, this wouldn't be necessary because voting "no" provides that opportunity. Quakers have a practice called "standing aside," allowing a person to state his or her concerns and even strong opposition to a course of action that seems to be moving toward approval. The clerk must then determine if more time is needed to discern God's leading. But the clerk must also consider if the person standing aside is doing so because of attentiveness to God's voice or because of stubbornness or personal issues that stand in the way of hearing God's voice.

Before taking the extreme step of standing aside, an individual should examine his or her own discernment process to see if the actions are a response to God's voice or are a result of unhelpful motives. In group discourse not focused on discerning God's leading, it is difficult to back away from strongly expressed positions. Debate is a form of verbal combat and no debater likes to lose. In challenging cases, the opponent of the proposed action continues to say the same things over and over again. In the worst cases, there is a hint or an open threat that the person will leave the group if that person does not get his or her way. This is a sign of dysfunction in the group and should prompt its members to pray for the healing of the individual's spirit and the spirit of the group.