

# FROM DESPAIR TO COMMUNION

## Discernment in the Writings of Luke

*Patrick J. Howell*

‘**W**E HAD HOPED . . . .’ These are some of the saddest, most doleful words in all of Scripture. They occur as two disciples are walking along the road to Emmaus and encounter a stranger. They engage him in conversation, and he asks them why they are so sad. They are amazed that he seems to be the only one in the world who has not heard of the recent events in Jerusalem, about the judgment and crucifixion of Jesus. They voice their disillusionment:

*We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. . . . Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. (Luke 24:21-23)*

This narrative, told and re-told in the Lukan community at Antioch and the rest of Syria in the five decades following the death of Jesus, describes the continuing journey of the community of disciples. It also speaks to our own contemporary disillusionment with the promises which ‘we had hoped’ would be fulfilled in our own time.

Those of us who grew up in our faith during the Second Vatican Council believed that the Church was on the edge of a new era. ‘We had hoped’ not only that the energy, enthusiasm, renewal of faith released by the Council would ignite a new fire, but that we could sustain this dazzling light until it blazed to completion. ‘We had hoped.’

Others in the next generation, sated with their elders’ Vatican II-war stories of the dismantling of the ‘old Church’, grew weary from all the conflicts and upheaval. Where were the traditions, the beauty of ritual, the reassurance of faith and of the things hoped for? Their own service work during college—on the streets of Calcutta, in the

struggling schools of Belize, in prison ministry, in the advocacy for Mexican workers diseased from toxic substances in the US-owned factories exploiting cheap wage earners—all seemed like a distant dream. Where were the values now? Where was the centre? Where was the hope?

The Lukan scriptures (both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles) describe a road through this disillusionment. They recount stories of illumination and awakening, seeing and discerning and committed action. They offer hope in the midst of despair, but they do not provide an easy do-it-yourself kit for healing or for happiness. Rather, in the midst of the darkest hours, not only of the disciples but also of Jesus himself, they proclaim that God is faithful: the God Who led the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt into the Promised Land and Who raised Jesus from the dead will not abandon us. But nor will this faithful God simply rescue us from pain, misery, and suffering. The pathway to redemption runs *through* the human; it is not some quasi-angelic flight from human reality.

This article will draw out some patterns from Luke's Gospel and from the Acts of the Apostles that might help us, both in our local communities and as a wider Church, in our discernment and decision-making. It assumes that these two Lukan writings developed over a period of fifty years, and that they reflect the ongoing discernment of an early Greek-speaking Church that was nevertheless acquainted with Hebrew scriptural traditions.<sup>1</sup>

We begin with four principles:

- that discernment occurs in the gathering of the community
- that facing into pain and naming one's disillusionment honestly can be transformational
- that truth-naming leadership is vital
- that tending to the body—concrete, mundane experiences of washing and eating and sleeping—and simple care for those in need enable us to enter into the Paschal mystery of our ongoing redemption. All are signs of how we too, like Christ and in Christ's power, are God become flesh.

<sup>1</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), pp. 3, 9.

### **The Gathering**

*All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women and Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as with his brothers. (Acts 1:14)*

The most distinguishing feature and the first condition for discernment is that there is a Gathering. The Greek word for The Gathering is *ekklesia*. It describes the calling forth and coming together of citizens or voters and it is also the root for our adjective *ecclesiastical*, which describes anything relating to Church. The early followers of Jesus were not called *Christians*—that came later—rather they were called *The Gathering*. They were an assembly, a calling forth of the citizen-voters of this new era. They were a ‘royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people’ (1 Peter 2:9). Unlike the people of earlier times, they were all citizens of this ‘holy nation’; together they were called to listen deeply.

Luke recounts how, after the violent death of Jesus, the disciples gathered in the Upper Room or the Cenacle. He names the eleven disciples and adds, they were people of the promise, they were awaiting the fulfilment of God’s Word (See Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4). In this expectant gathering Luke describes a tranquil scene—no longer in fearful hiding, as they had been before when ‘they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit’ (Luke 24:37). They are no longer fearful, scattered individuals; they have become a peaceful assembly (Acts 2:1-4). What has changed? What has shifted?

Certainly one major factor is that they are all gathered together in prayer. No one seems left out. All the disciples of Jesus and all his family are present. The previous tensions with the family of Jesus seem, at least for the time, to have dissipated. Surprisingly, especially in a patriarchal society, the evangelist specifically names Mary of Nazareth and the other women who had followed Jesus. Mary sits in their midst. In fact, much of Christian iconography and imagination pictures her in the very middle of the Eleven and all the other disciples, leading them in prayer. All look to her for guidance. She has become the model disciple and the mother of wisdom.

We need to ask why? Perhaps it is because she has already been here before. She has already intimately known fear at the invitation of God. She has sorrowed for the loss of a child. She has treasured the everlastingly new, creative workings of God. Thirty years before, she



*El Greco, Pentecost*

had welcomed the Spirit and enfleshed the Christ. Now she is expectant again, and in communion with each person here. Jesus, flesh of her flesh, has drawn them all here together as one Body.

There is also a caution that we need to add. Later mariology and Christian imagination tend to emphasize Mary to the exclusion of all the other women in the scene. This portrayal results in a focus on ‘the mother and her sons’ and can lead us to forget the importance of adult relationships between men and women. Such an emphasis on Mary to the exclusion of other women in ministry leadership roles cannot be found in either Acts or the Gospel of Luke.

How might we ourselves have the courage to join this Gathering? What draws us? Who helps us to gather? What fears, what anxieties, what cravings prevent us from freely joining this gathering of prayer?

Some examples of blockages might include: a lingering resentment towards someone because of a ruptured friendship; a fear that, if change occurs, we will lose our role or even our job; or a fear of deeper intimacy, whether with God or with each other, and of the commitment that will come with it. All these are real fears, and ones which the disciples experienced. They are the very ones that prevent sufficient spiritual freedom for discernment. By coming together in prayer, especially around the Eucharist, we already acknowledge our need for God’s spirit to infuse our lives with healing and forgiveness.

*Our first principle from Luke is that discernment is done in the Gathering, drawn together in expectant prayer.*

### **Facing the Pain**

*‘We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. . . .’* (Luke 24:21)

*‘Friends . . . Judas became a guide for those who arrested Jesus.’* (Acts 1:16)

In the resurrection narratives Jesus allows the disciples to bring their disillusionment to the surface, to name their loss, to acknowledge publicly their betrayal, and to express their sorrow. Through these processes, transformation can take place. The Stranger invites the disciples on the road to Emmaus to recount the tragic events of the past few days. With a simple, encouraging opening to the two downcast disciples, he says, ‘What events?’ Stricken with grief, they tell their story at length. Then the Stranger reframes the shocking death of Jesus by

recalling untold portions of the Jesus-story and by reinterpreting their pinched account. He illuminates it with the whole history of the promised covenant. But first, he invites and listens to the disciples telling their painful story as they walk along the road.

Redemption occurs by the journey through the human, not by some angelic escape from it. God embraced all that is human. Down through the centuries, the Gathering affirms this human journey. The Gathering at Vatican II, for instance, proclaimed:

The joys and hopes and sorrows and anxieties of people today, especially of those who are poor and afflicted, are also the joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties of the disciples of Christ, and there is nothing truly human which does not also affect them.<sup>2</sup>

Much unhappiness occurs because people avoid reality. It is too painful. Denial takes hold. People revert to old patterns of escapism or blame ('I was betrayed by God' or 'I was betrayed by my closest friend'), or revert to a false optimism or to angry self-flagellation. These stratagems dodge the painful truth. All the great world religions encourage believers to face and accept the pain of reality, rather than engage in futile, destructive escape. 'Life is suffering' was the first of the Four Noble Truths taught by Buddha. Once we see and accept this truth, we are truly free. Pain and suffering ease because they no longer have a grip on us.

Organizations or institutions are notorious for avoiding reality. For many US Americans the Vietnam War or the atrocities of the CIA in Latin America were an awakening to the multitude of ways that a government can delude itself and its people. Nor is the Church free of such delusions. Multiple voices lay, religious, priests and bishops have called for a new openness in the Church and for a greater frankness in our speech.

At the European Synod of Bishops (1999), Cardinal Martini, the former archbishop of Milan, urged the Church to face its present reality. In his synod speech he described three dreams he had for the future of the Church.<sup>3</sup> One of them was for a universal council of the bishops to

<sup>2</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, n. 1, translation from *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, volume 2, *Trent to Vatican II*, edited by Norman P. Tanner, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), p. 1069.

<sup>3</sup> *The Tablet* (30 October 1999) pp. 1489-1490. The author was present at an informal conference in Rome where Cardinal Martini expanded on his brief eight-minute intervention at the Synod.

treat the intractable, clearly identifiable issues in the Church. Every pastor, the Cardinal explained, knows what they are and deals with them daily.

Our own listing of these knotty problems include: 1) an emphasis on priestly celibacy to the exclusion of providing eucharistic and sacramental needs;<sup>4</sup> 2) issues around sacramental marriage and the remarriage of divorced Catholics which cause pervasive pain; 3) even more acute in these last few years, the sexual abuse of minors by clergy and an episcopal culture which has led to secrecy, cover-up and further abuse in several dioceses.

The church as a whole needs to gather together, Martini recommended, and deal with these neuralgic issues frankly, honestly, prayerfully. They need to listen to experts both lay and clerical, and then make a decision. It is not that difficult, and there is ample precedent for it, he said. After all, the first council of the Church, the Council of Jerusalem in 49 AD, dealt with only one issue, namely how the Gentiles were to be received into the Church. From our own reading of the Acts of the Apostles we know that at that council pastors in the field, like Paul and Barnabas, confronted the church leadership in Jerusalem, who then changed or modified their position. Then together they all dealt with the new reality in the Church.

**Do not burden  
God's people** The direction is clear: do not burden the people with a yoke that neither they nor their ancestors were able to bear (Acts 15:10). Trust that the people have heard the good news and become believers, and therefore follow the law of love inscribed in their hearts and lives. The Spirit blows where it wills and cannot be contained. At the same time certain basic observances—not to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to refrain from unlawful marriage—are imposed in order to avoid scandal and further dissension (Acts 15:28).

Facing reality calls forth courage and wisdom, which are already the gifts of the Spirit. Nothing we face today is any more urgent or the solutions called for any more radical than was the issue of dispensing the Gentiles from the Deuteronomic code in the first century.

Almost all of us—church leaders included—attempt to avoid these painful realities. This basic human tendency to avoid reality, and the

<sup>4</sup> Francis Dorff, 'Are We Killing Our Priests?', *America*, 182 (29 April 2000), pp. 7-9. Bishop Kenneth Untener is here quoted as saying that the shortage of priests is 'real and getting worse . . . the biggest problem I face as a bishop'. According to Dorff, 'we encourage and reward our priests for workaholism'.

suffering inherent in it, is the cause of much human illness, and is fertile ground for destructive, demonic forces in the Church. On the personal level, the avoidance of conflict over a misunderstanding can lead to festering resentments. On the Church level, we currently have an abundance of examples. If the US bishops had addressed the issue of sexual abuse of minors by clergy when they heard the first comprehensive reports of it in 1985, the ongoing abuse might have been severely curbed, and the Church might have been spared tremendous scandal. In this instance, the abuse of authority is perhaps even greater. Yet another example of an assault on truth is the silencing of cardinals, bishops, sisters, priests and theologians who have threatened the Vatican power structure.<sup>5</sup>

*So our second principle is that the complete telling of our stories, however painful, will open the door to healing and reconciliation.*

### **Transforming Leadership**

*In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred and twenty persons) and said, 'Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus—for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.'*  
(Acts 1:15-17)

One of the most excruciating realities that the Gathering had to face was the fact that one of their own had betrayed Jesus, and that most of them had scattered at the arrest of Jesus for fear of their lives. Peter must have been painfully aware of his own betrayal of his beloved friend, more than anyone else in the group. Yet he is the first to stand up and to take responsibility. He is the first to publicly name this unbearable reality.

Similarly, John Paul II on the First Sunday of Lent, 2000, begged for forgiveness and humbly asked for reconciliation from many of the people that the Church had harmed through the ages—Jews, women, indigenous peoples, people of other faiths. In making this Jubilee Year act of humility, and in thus requesting forgiveness, John Paul II reportedly had to break through the resistance of many curial officials

<sup>5</sup> See Garry Wills, *Papal Sin: the Structures of Deceit* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

who thought it was ‘inopportune’ or would ‘send the wrong message’ or would ‘put the Church in a bad light’.

A transforming leader faces the reality of sin.<sup>6</sup> In one of his novels, Wendell Berry refers to ‘young preachers’ who,

. . . were bright and could speak—I mean they could sound as if they were awake and troubled enough in their own hearts to have something to say.<sup>7</sup>

Peter was such a transforming leader, not because he himself had such great leadership skills or innate charismatic power, but rather because he had been transformed. The power of the resurrection encounter, the radical forgiveness of his betrayal, and the descent of the Spirit transformed Peter from a fearful, though loving person into a courageous proclaimer of Christ’s saving power. Transforming leaders are most often those who have undergone transformation themselves.

A transforming leader enables people to stay in their pain and to grapple with it, rather than to give way to the easy temptations to escape, to run, and to hide. Transforming leaders—perhaps through their skill, but most likely through their unshakable trust in people—help the Gathering to stay focused, to stay with the story in all its richness, human frailty, and murky potential. A transforming leader helps the community realise the dead end of easy escapes, of infantile blaming, or of easy denial.

Transforming leaders may not be immediately obvious. Witness Mary. The disciples gather round her in prayer. Her quiet wisdom penetrates the room. She quietly assists in transforming their anxieties into prayer. All the wisdom of the past years now courses through her; all her pain and sorrow, her own moments of disillusionment, her own honest acceptance of her life in God become a source for this Gathering. Some of her experience, crystallized in a word or phrase, reverberates down through the centuries: ‘She was greatly troubled at the saying’ (Luke 1:29). And in another passage, ‘Son, why have you

<sup>6</sup> James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 4. Burns identifies two basic types of leadership: the *transactional* and the *transforming*. The relations of most leaders and followers are *transactional*—leaders approach followers with an eye to exchanging one thing for another, for example jobs for votes. *Transforming* leadership, while more complex, is more powerful. The transforming leader recognises and builds on an existing need of a follower, but seeks to evoke higher motives as well as to engage the full person of the follower.

<sup>7</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Counterpoint Press, 2000) p. 162.

treated us so? Your father and I have been looking for you anxiously.' 'And his mother kept all these things in her heart' (Luke 2:48, 51). 'My soul magnifies the Lord' (Luke 1:46). Maternity, compassion, liberating power, intimate presence, and re-creative energy dwell in her heart.<sup>8</sup> These are transformative energies—although in our secular culture or even in the hierarchical Church, this type of leadership is not given much credence.

I have focused on the transformative leadership that Mary offers. Similar claims can be made for the Samaritan woman at the well and for Mary of Magdala. In fact, the issue of leadership warrants a whole separate article.<sup>9</sup> In it we would also want to develop the voices and contributions of the disabled, of gays and lesbians, of the marginalised, and of the elderly as sources for transformation. But here, in an article on discernment, let us simply name our third principle.

*A discerning leader trusts the Spirit working through every dimension of the human.*

### **Tending the Body**

*The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb, and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment. (Luke 23:55-56)*

Some details in Scripture, such as this one, seem rather peripheral. Why so much attention to spices and ointments and their preparation? Why so much fuss over a body that is dead, mangled, and pierced? As a resurrection people, shouldn't we put the Cross behind us? Shouldn't we, after all, be looking forward towards living in the Spirit, rather than getting bogged down in the mundane tasks of washing and anointing and burying the body? Of course, it needs to be done, but does it merit attention of sacred scripture? Didn't this new Way, this new life in Christ, supersede all the Sabbath observance and the Old Law? If indeed these Lukan texts were first written as late as the 80s AD, why is

<sup>8</sup> See Elizabeth A. Johnson, 'Mary and the Female Face of God', *Theological Studies*, 50 (September, 1989), pp. 500-526.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to James McGregor Burns, readers may wish to consult Peter F. Drucker, *The Effective Executive* (New York: HarperBusiness, 1993 [1966]); and Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1994).

there still an emphasis on Sabbath observance after all that has happened?

***The road to  
the Spirit is  
through the  
human***

As we raise these questions, we can see that these three little sentences reveal layers and layers of wisdom. They provide an icon for the importance of staying grounded, for attending to the body, for 'looking at the birds of the air and the lilies of the field', for reverencing all the creation around us, caring for it, absorbing from it. Once again we realise that 'our expectations are not God's'. Or in a rather ironic twist, 'the human way is God's way'. The road to Spirit is through the human, through the daily fidelity to visiting the sick, anointing the dying, feeding the hungry, washing little faces, sweeping the floors, washing and anointing the dead. Tending to the body reveals an action most divine, for God's manner is ordinary. 'By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God' (1 John 4:2).

Tending to the body does not mean pampering whims. Some discipline and curbing of appetites remain vital for a spirit of openness. The bracketing of our own inordinate cravings enable us to attend to deeper, more genuine desires arising from our depths through the action of the Spirit. By developing the ascetical skill of listening to the heart of another, we discover the multiple and wondrous ways in which the Spirit is also acting in our midst.<sup>10</sup>

A couple of humorous incidents related to papal elections illustrate this point about attending to the body and to mundane human needs. Through the centuries, conclaves of cardinals to elect a new pope have become deadlocked because of competing factions or rival families offering their own favourite son. At one such conclave in Orvieto, Italy, the electors were deadlocked for weeks. The increasingly impatient multitude removed the rooftop of the meeting hall so that the lordly cardinals would bake in the summer sun. Exposed to a new reality, they quickly elected a new pope. In another tediously long conclave held in Rome, the faithful simply cut the food supply in half. Minds were focused, and a decisive election promptly made. No one would say that

<sup>10</sup> We should not assume a dichotomy between 'my desires' and 'God's desires'. In fact, just the opposite is the case. Most spiritual writers consider our own deepest desires as God-given and congruent with God's will. However, the possibilities for deception, of ego-centered selfishness masked as virtue, are legion. So our own deepest gifts and experiences may need the gentle corrective of an astute spiritual director or the guidance arising from communal discernment.

these processes were ideal examples of discernment, but—by exaggeration—they are making one important point: good discernment will always take into account the messages sent by our bodies.

*A fourth principle of discernment is that attending to the body grounds us in our own human reality wherein God dwells.*

### **The Truth of the Spirit**

These four principles operate as conditions for discernment. They invite us to await the power of God. They prepare us, dispose us for God's gracious initiative. And so we pray:

Send forth your Spirit and renew the face of the Earth,  
Renew in us the fire of your divine love.

What are the fruits of this coming of the Spirit? We will name here just two: *understanding each other's languages* and a *capacity to re-frame or re-imagine* the current pastoral reality.

### **Understanding Each Other's Languages**

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:1-4)*

All begin to speak and understand each other's language. Undoubtedly this event reflects the traditional understanding of the gift of tongues, but for our reflection it points to a deeper reality as well. All present understood each other—no matter which language was spoken. There was a communion and presence to each other that transcended all boundaries, lowered all barriers, and which appreciated the diversity and accents and customs of all present—whether from Jerusalem or Mesopotamia or Cappadocia or even from Rome.

Many faith communities experience such joy after a long struggle and after facing the darkness of their own journey together. The breakthrough may involve some members acknowledging their own fears or apologizing for their rash decisions or seeking reconciliation with each other. Resentment, anger at perceived snubs, or even justified

anger at betrayal—all surge upward for the healing touch of God. And our passionate God reaches out a wounded hand, and sends solace and balm and peace.

The gifts of the Spirit are clearly manifest in this Pentecostal scene that Luke describes. The disciples have moved from Gathering to Touching the Pain to Openness to the Spirit. They reach an understanding beyond all their grievances, beyond language barriers. In the process they reinterpret their entire reality in the light of this blazing transformational event. Now they act. And they act without hesitation. They act with wisdom and courage.

*The Spirit engenders a profound presence to each other. It births the Christ made flesh and dispels differences, as well as leading us to a deeper appreciation of every individual's unique gifts within the Gathering.*

### **Reinterpreting our Reality in the Light of the Scriptures**

*Peter, standing with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed them. . . .  
'David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,*

*The Lord said to my Lord,  
Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.*

*Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.'*  
(Acts 2:14, 34-36)

Peter reinterprets the Old Testament texts by applying them to Jesus the crucified one. It is a new time. The resurrection event casts all the Scriptures in a new light. Peter engages in what all good pastors do every Sunday. He interprets the scriptures, which illuminate the congregation's new experiences. Such preaching sheds light in two directions—the Scriptures illuminate our own experience and, in turn, our own experience reinterprets the Scriptures.

The biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann describes this dynamic interplay of a faith community embracing the living word as movements of obedience and interpretation. Brueggemann says, 'Interpretation that seeks to let the old word be the living word must be an act of obedience'.<sup>11</sup> *Obedient interpretation* discovers how the Bible authorises,

<sup>11</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 1.

evokes, and enables a world that is an alternative to the deathly world of our dominant value system. Likewise *interpretive obedience* imagines how the nonnegotiable intentions of God are to be discerned and practised in our situation. The entire process involves an obediential listening to Scripture, a diligent grasp of the pastoral situation, and a re-imagining of pastoral opportunities.

To illustrate, Brueggemann identifies the Ten Commandments as both the deep base of Israel's covenantal existence and also as the warrant for liberated reflection. He recalls for us that Israel insists that no one shall add to or subtract from this simple terse code (Deut. 4:2). Having voiced this prohibition, Israel proceeds to add reams of additional commentary and speeches and sermons to the commands. This expansion of the Ten Commandments was an odd but faithful way in Israel of 'adding nothing'. The commandments, Brueggemann wryly observes, 'are utterly nonnegotiable', but 'they are also endlessly negotiated'.<sup>12</sup> This reinterpretation is the act of imagination. Israel has no alternative but to probe the memory, and to trust the future of the memory that pushes beyond itself. Only through imagination and continual interpretation can we as a community be faithful to the Scriptures.

**God's Word  
is nonnegotiable  
yet constantly  
renegotiated**

*Through the Spirit, the Gathering re-imagines and reinterprets its present reality in the light of God's faithful action in the past.*

In this article we have drawn four principles for discernment from the Lukan Scriptures. Then we described two consequences arising from a discernment faithful to the memory of Jesus and open to the future promised by the Spirit.

God may surprise us. Without warning, our hearts become afire with God's very presence, which deeply connects us all. Transformed, we speak each other's language. We live out of the abundance of God's gifts, rather than out of our own fears and anxieties. We move into a deeper understanding of each other, even a wordless intimacy. Such motions can best be described as a surrender to God's initiative, rather than anything that the faith community *does* for itself.

<sup>12</sup>Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience*, p. 3.

The Gathering understands itself and its relationship with God in a whole new light. Through an obediential listening to scripture and its own pastoral situation, it re-imagines the current plight. It envisions opportunities. It draws unexpected energy from the intersection of tradition with its own deeply felt experience. All this may sound complex, but it flows simply and naturally out of prayer, contemplation, and commitment to the Gathering.

In conclusion, we can say that discernment has no formulas. It is a lifetime process of obediential listening to the Scriptures proclaimed in the Gathering, and of attending to God's Spirit recreating the world in our personal and communal depths.

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