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# Communities of Discernment



How do you introduce yourself? When we are at meetings and are told to say our names and a little bit about ourselves, the North American custom is to tell about our jobs or where we went to school or what we do. In New Zealand, I learned, the Maori people (the first people of New Zealand, who came largely from Polynesian islands and now compose almost 16 percent of New Zealand's population) have very different introductory customs. My correspondent told me that when she and other Maori people in her unit at the university in Auckland want to visit people in an area to do research, they demonstrate respect by discovering first what the customs are in the place to which they want to go. They do this because when they visit, the *mana* or prestige and competence (and much more) of the whole group, each individual person, and all of their families and tribes are represented in them.

When they introduce themselves, they name the river, the mountain, and other geographical details of their homeland and the *waka* or canoe on which their tribal ancestors traveled to get to Aotearoa (the Maori name for New Zealand), as well as their parents' names, before mentioning their own names. This symbolizes their place in the world. Because

their listeners will make connections (as my correspondent says, for better or worse), the visitors are mindful that they carry responsibility for any future relations of their people—their tribe, their family, and so forth—with the people they visit. The Maori people are divided into tribes (called *iwi*), which are composed of clans (*hapu*), made up of family groups (*whanau*), so all these are represented in any individual.

Maori people are thus always aware of the long-term consequences (to future generations) of their actions here and now. Of course, this has definite effects on all decision-making processes. How much more carefully all of us might tread if we were more consciously attentive to everything that is at stake in all of our interactions with other people and in other places.

Because of this emphasis on one's behavior reflecting on the whole family and tribe, my friend would want me to stress for you that she does not consider herself to be speaking for all the Maori people. She emphasizes that this is merely one person's perspective and should not be taken as representative of the whole. (We will return to the necessity for that disclaimer further on.)

Nonetheless, her comments are crucially important for us because they point out to North Americans and others in the world who might need the caution, how individualistic we are in our thinking and acting, how alone we often are in our behaviors and decision making. What are we missing because we do not conceive of ourselves as belonging to a community and do not realize that our actions and attitudes reflect on our people as a whole? I often thought of one person's influence on a people's reputation when I was on the college concert choir tour and observed North Americans' behaviors in other countries. In many places tourists from the United States earned a bad reputation for the

country as a whole because of their inconsiderate or condescending manners.

At the beginning of this book, we noted that one of our problems is that we make our decisions in terms of "who I am," instead of with regard to "whose I am." This chapter at the center of the book is pivotal, then, in more ways than one and more extensive than the others because it deals with a major element missing in North American culture.

In Chapter Four, we noted the continuing spiral of character formation and practicing virtues and moral behavior. In this chapter, we will focus on another spiral—that of the effect of communal practices on the forming of an individual's character, which, in turn, upbuilds the whole community. This underscores one of my major theses for the past several years—that Christians' faith and life in the United States are not as strongly shaped according to Christian truths and values because we do not live in deeply connected Christian communities.[1]

These two interlocking spirals are crucially important. The more Christians make very deliberate choices to engage in distinctively Christian practices, the more their character is formed with Christian virtues and morals, which will lead, in turn, to more thoroughly Christian discernments. Furthermore, the greater the number of Christians making such alternative choices, the more Christian communities will develop a biblical culture, which will, successively, help people to make those intentional choices and thereby form people more deeply with Christian character.

In this chapter, we especially pay attention to the importance of community participation in processes of decision making, which was stressed in conversations throughout the world. For example, in all the countries I've visited that were formerly under communist rule, people told me about the

significance of the family (especially because loved ones were the only people who could be trusted in a culture of spying and reporting). A Slovakian couple (who are both clergypersons) stressed how influential their own parents were in their decision making.

North Americans might turn to their parents or to other people in certain crisis situations or when faced with a major decision, but do we understand the importance of recognizing the community to which we belong in all our minor decisions, in the interactions of our everyday lives, in all our exchanges with other people? Especially if we are Christians, we have the added benefit of living in light of the whole community of faith over time and space—especially as we try to live out of our immersion in the Scriptures, which record the wisdom of that community, and in a lively present faith community of saints. Do we realize that our moral character and godly virtues are formed best through the context of the entire Christian community?

Howard Baker, a spiritual director whose book *Soul Keeping* is subtitled *Ancient Paths of Spiritual Direction,* emphasizes that we need the mentorship of the complete Christian community because of the deceitfulness of our hearts. He writes, "The voice of ancient guidance delivers us from a culturally determined spirituality. The voice of contemporary guidance rescues us from a do-it-yourself spirituality. And the voice of personalized guidance saves us from a one-size-fits-all spirituality."[2] In other words, we need the wisdom of those who have gone before us and the good sense of a community that is with us and knows us so that we can best discern what to do and how to be to become more truly ourselves.

Instead, in North America we are taught to "be ourselves" without that rooting in a community or are told to "march to the beat of our own drummer." We are thereby

urged to make up our own stories, but as professor Charles Pinches of the University of Scranton says in his book *A Gathering of Memories,* "The advice has the effect of making us think that we really must find ourselves separate from the communities that sustain us by their memory."[3]

As we will see from the stories in this chapter, to participate in a fellowship of memory—especially the family, the local community, and the Church or faith tradition—enables us to know ourselves more deeply and to discern more truly what is best for the sake of others and also for ourselves. When we know to whom we belong, we find more profound meaning for our lives because we are part of such a people and because we have such a God.

## HONOR AND SHAME

In earlier chapters, we have rarely mentioned negative aspects of the gifts that we have been pondering, primarily because we would not normally find difficulties, for example, in people displaying caring virtues and a character deeply formed in moral will (Chapter Four). Nor is it a hindrance if we rectify the names (Chapter Three), though, of course, it is problematic if we think we are clarifying the issues when instead we are arriving at prejudiced perceptions. But in this chapter, we will observe that the great gift of community also has several possibilities for complications.

Though community counsel for decision making is an aspect lamentably missing in North America, the effects of community values can indeed be both positive and negative. In one Chinese city which my husband and I visited, teachers working with local students said that the Chinese culture's emphasis on honor and shame for the family caused some

difficulties. (Unfortunately, because I can speak only a few words in Mandarin, I could hear only one side of this story.)

In one case, the school had problems with a young boy's misbehavior. It seemed that his parents wouldn't deal with the actual wrongdoing, but instead they worried only about the shame to be brought to the family name if he was expelled. The result of that choice on their part caused destructive effects not only on the school, but even more on the primary family.

I began to wonder, and then discussed it with Chinese friends, whether this high emphasis on not causing the family shame makes repentance difficult because that would bring dishonor to one's relatives. It would also adversely affect one's decisions about truthfulness. My conversation partners agreed and insisted that churches must be careful to teach a deeper understanding of both confession and forgiveness so that people have more true freedom to repent.

Also, many Chinese acquaintances told me that it had sometimes been difficult for them and their friends to become Christians because it was thought to bring their families shame. I wonder if Christians in North America would take their faith more seriously if their decision to engage in Christian practices forced them to pay the price of family ostracism.

As could be expected, all these issues are further complicated by the difficulties of being Christians in China under the communist government. The schools are required to teach all religions; teachers asked me how then it could be possible for them truly to train children in habits of the Christian faith. In our conversations they realized that their own character in the midst of the more full Christian character of the entire community in general was preeminently significant. If students became interested in the character of the Christian community and asked a school's teachers for a

Bible, faculty members were permitted to give them one, though they were not allowed to make a widespread distribution.

On the issue of honor and shame, then, what we see is a clash of two communities' values. The Chinese culture emphasizes that children should not have anything done to them (such as expulsion) that would bring shame on the family, whereas the Christian community is more concerned that the boy's character be formed for him to realize the extensive trouble that his severe misbehavior was causing the teachers and other students. Or perhaps this is a case of not rectifying the names. Perhaps the parents are misunderstanding their own culture's emphasis on what is truly shameful to the family.

A man named Edward from Korea commented further on the benefits and detriments of the Asian emphasis on honor. He said that it was more helpful to make persons mindful of the community than was the Western accent on the personal. But he said that it could sometimes take precedence over consideration of right and wrong (as we saw in the earlier school case), it could become an intolerable burden, or both. Another conversation partner, Christina, agreed that the mentality that one's decisions affect the whole family could put enormous pressure on a person. For example, some of my students from Singapore at Regent College in Vancouver, B.C., took classes under the monumental strain of having to get all A's to "preserve their family's [or their nation's] honor." One was told that people from Singapore should always be the best students in any class in North America. This was an unreasonable hardship not only for the students, but also for the professors, who sometimes had to give a poorer grade because a student's work was not up to par.

This shows us the necessity for the virtues and moral will. One would hope that a family or a people would enfold

the individual with such care that the responsibility to be accountable to the whole community would not become an intolerable burden but would be seen as encouragement and support, as a privilege and an assistance. That is the goal in the Christian community—to embrace one another in the unity of love and the bond of peace, so that the counsel of the larger body is truly for the best of the individual and the well-being of the whole.

Asian churches, in general, have the added problem that they are composed of a majority of young people (partly as a reflection of the demographics of the larger culture). As a result, many churches that we encountered do not have enough people to assist the pastor in leadership (usually as elders) because not many persons are old enough or wise enough.

Because the culture calls for listening to the counsel of community members with authority, one seminary professor told me, this puts tremendous pressure on the pastors. As a result, a large percentage of them burn out and leave the ministry. Similarly, the notion of shame can be hard on pastors because people judge them adversely if their families have any problems.

In another conversation, Peter from Singapore pointed out another problem of communal guidance—namely, that a person's obedience to the authority of elders, parents, or pastors might become mere outward compliance. Moses from Hong Kong agreed, but he emphasized that Christians in general knew that their higher authority was in God, so they took very seriously those who were in leadership over them and under God.

Moses' remark makes apparent one gift of the Christian community to counterbalance the enormous responsibility pastors and elders bear in their leadership roles. Because they

are shepherding the community under the authority of God and the Church of which Christ is the Head, they can place themselves in turn under the leadership of the whole Church throughout time and space in order to gain more wisdom. They can also more readily confess to the congregation their failures and burdens because they are truly trying to serve under God and not attempting to take the place of God.

In a completely different direction, my friend Carol Barrera, the translator who works with the Achí people in Guatemala, pointed out a problem that missionaries can have when they live in a communal culture. She disclosed this difficulty that she encountered:

> There is also a strong sense that it is inappropriate to single out someone for special attention. For instance, if you can't afford to build a nice house for everyone, don't do it for *anyone.* After the earthquake of '76 the majority of people needed to rebuild. It was acceptable to give a little to everyone, but not a lot to a few.
>
> We found this out the hard way. Friends in the States gave us some funds to administer. Our idea was to choose three or four "worthy" families and build them simple, decent houses. People hated us *and* them. (Jealousy?) The next gift we got, we consulted with a leader. He suggested giving everyone a pittance. We did. Everyone was happy (except us, because we felt we had helped *no one,* really).

Carol's observations enable us to perceive how different is the outcome when people think of themselves as part of a whole. Then everyone is responsible for the well-being of everyone else. That is hard for us to understand if we have been formed by the individualism and the sense of who is "deserving" that prevail in North America. After thirty years

of serving with the Achí, Carol realizes that the word *worthy* had to be put in quotation marks and that more is going on than simple jealousy when a few people are singled out for help; perhaps the issue also includes the problem of help from outsiders who are considered to be very rich and who, therefore, should help everyone. But we must also realize that the entire communal way of life of that culture challenges our ideas of how best to help and makes us acknowledge that perhaps encouragement of everyone might be a better goal.

In the same way, it is difficult for people formed by individualism to understand why the Maori person cited at the beginning of this chapter would not want her remarks to be interpreted as representative of the Maori people as a whole. People from that culture would not wish to be quoted and do not want in the slightest to be perceived as speaking "on behalf" of the Maori. There are two very important explanations for this. First, there is the issue of "authority" or *mana,* a more comprehensive word of the Maoris, who always ask which person has the *mana* to speak for the rest on a particular issue. Typically, the proper person would be a very senior person raised in the traditions of the culture. The notion of *mana,* I am told, is somewhat similar to the English concept of "prestige," although it additionally encompasses an amalgam of one's spiritual authority, lineage and people, age, competence, and learning.

I experienced the "catch-22" of *mana* when I was hoping to talk with a group of Maori people while I was in New Zealand. Those who were senior and would have had the authority to speak were not able to meet with me because of their own business and my conflicting speaking engagements, and those who would be more junior might not have really known enough about Maori cultural matters to

recognize that they didn't have the *mana* to speak with me about them. In that case, their information would more likely be unreliable.

The other explanation for Maoris' reluctance to be quoted is one that gives me pause as I try to be appropriately sensitive in including pieces about their culture in this book. The Maori people have a rightful dread that comments could or would be construed as giving away their cultural treasures. North Americans can understand this if we regret that more and more cultural and intellectual property winds up on the Web regardless of copyright covenants.

Also, from historical experience the Maoris know that such betrayal of cultural gifts can come back and "bite" them in various ways. Again, North Americans might be able to understand that concern (though we cannot comprehend the pain of the Maoris' experiences) as we think about how Native Americans have been treated in the past and are still treated today. Or we witness betrayals of the Amish people and their way of life when the media continually invade their homelands and exploit audiences' curiosity about their "strangenesses." The most extreme case of this might be the inclusion of Amish youths in a television reality show attempting to disclose how they might adapt to "the rest of the world" and yet displaying no genuine consideration for their faith life and cultural treasures.

As I share cultural gifts in this book for the sake of our learning better skills of discernment, please receive and handle those treasures with respect. They are introduced in these chapters for the sake of our mutual growth in wisdom, faith, and life and therefore should never be taken lightly or in a way that does not honor those from whom we receive them. It is especially important to say these things in this chapter, which concentrates on the gifts of the community

for our discernment processes. This entire book is intended to be a sampling of treasures from the global community so that people whose methods of discernment are primarily individualistic and characterized by values taken from the technological consumerist milieu in which we live can receive better tools and make better decisions for the well-being of the whole world.

## BIBLICAL EMPHASIS ON COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT

In Chapter Three we met Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, who exhorted Moses to appoint trustworthy, God-fearing people who could care for the *shalom* of the people they served, who would not seek dishonest gain, and who would share Moses' burden. This was one of the first examples in this book of the importance of communal help for the sake of making better decisions. We have encountered other examples from the Scriptures and from other cultures in the earlier chapters.

One of the most important reasons for seeking communal instruction for discernment is apparent in the very writing of the Bible. Almost all of its verbs outside narratives of Jesus are plural. With the exception of the books Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, which were written to those individuals, most of the rest of the Bible's instructions to discern, choose, make wise decisions, and so forth are primarily in the plural. We are more likely to discern and decide wisely if we do it in the midst of the community.

For example, in the book of Proverbs, fools are so named because they "despise wisdom and instruction" from others (1:7b). The wise are urged ever to continue to "hear and gain in learning" (1:5a). We can never know enough to

act on our own. We always need the greater wisdom of the whole community.

One special note in the Scriptures helps us particularly realize the immense value of gaining communal wisdom for discernment. The apostle Paul's list of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:7–11 specifically cites "discernment of spirits" as one of those gifts (v. 10). This means that in the Christian community there are persons who have a remarkable gift to ascertain whether a certain mode of action is from God or from other spirits—such as those of the society which envelops us.

I have had the wonderful experience more than once of a group of members in the Christian community helping me to see whether a choice I was making fit in with God's purposes or seemed to come instead more from my own inner longings or from pressures on me from the outside. Such gifts of others' discernment were invaluable in steering me away from selfishness and the values of society into more godly choices, choices that reflect the God and people to whom I belong.

Furthermore, Paul's enumeration of spiritual gifts (charisms) lists various other endowments from the Holy Spirit that contribute to better discernment. Charisms such as wisdom, knowledge, prophecy, and healing can all be beneficial to enlighten us, prod us, console us in our decision processes. Sometimes we need to be built up in order to choose well. Other times we need to be spurred. And often we need healing of past wounds before we can make better choices for the future. All together, members of the Christian community provide many gifts that bring about greater wholeness in ourselves and the entire body so that the best decisions possible can be made by all of us. Only within such a framework

of community can we really discover our spiritual calling and true selves.

Throughout, the Scriptures call God's people—both Jews in the Hebrew Bible/First Testament and Christians in the Second/New Testament—to become a community characterized by faithfulness to God and love for God and the neighbor. In addition, many attributes of the people of God are named or described. These include such traits as that they should be a community of hospitality, generosity, reconciliation, suffering, and celebration—traits that we will ponder in the last chapters of this book as especially helpful for godly discernment and still exemplified in cultures throughout the world.

The New Testament book of the Acts of the Apostles demonstrates all these traits. We notice the hospitality of such people as Lydia, who welcomes Paul and Luke (the writer of Acts uses the word *we*) and perhaps Silas and others (Acts 16:13–15) and the church (v. 40) to her home. We observe the generosity of Barnabas, who sold a field that belonged to him and gave all the money for the use of the apostles and the church (Acts 4:36–37). We see many of the apostles suffering at various times, but we also glimpse as many examples of great celebration throughout the book.

One especially wonderful example of reconciliation that offers supreme guidance for communal discernment takes place in Acts 15. Certain people in the fledgling church were stirring up a disturbance because they didn't want new believers to be welcomed without their undergoing circumcision according to the Jewish law. Consequently, the apostle Paul and his companion Barnabas, Peter and the other disciples of Jesus, and the elders in the community assemble together to consider the matter.

After Paul and Barnabas give a complete report (15:12), James suggests a way to proceed that negates the necessity for circumcision (vv. 13–21), and then the apostles and the elders make a decision on how to move forward—with the consent of the whole church (v. 22). When they compose a letter, they write to the believers who were confused because of the troublemakers, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials" (v. 28).

This sentence signals two indispensable ingredients in communal discernment: a corporate seeking of the mind of God and a consensus of the whole group that God's will has been discovered by the power of the Holy Spirit—in this case, that new Christians need not first obey Jewish law. Two examples of these intentions to seek God's mind by consensus in contemporary communal discernment will be given at the end of this chapter, after we turn to see the corporate life of various fellowships in other cultures of the world.

## CELTIC AND MONASTIC COMMUNITIES

The ancient Celtic traditions make clear what the Bible only subtly suggests—namely, that God's people belong in a community as a response to, and in imitation of, the Trinity, which is a perfect community. The Bible only hints at this in the Genesis 1 creation account (as we saw in our discussion of the Trinity in Chapter One) when God, Who is not yet revealed as three named Persons, says, "Let us make humankind in our image" (Genesis 1:26). If we grasp that to be in the image of God involves relationship, then we are violat-

ing the very substance of our creation when we try to live and act, discern and choose on our own.

The Celts loved the Trinity profoundly. Many of the prayers of the Celts are deeply trinitarian; they usually name the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, often in choruses with a common refrain after each Person is named and described. Then, many of these prayers and songs widen out to emphasize the community of believers. Thus the faithful, influenced by Celtic traditions, are formed to think in terms of communal life.

In his book on Celtic spirituality from Wales, Patrick Thoms quotes a wonderful saying, *"Cadw ty mewn cwmwl tystion,"* which means "keeping house in a cloud of witnesses."[4] The phrase *cloud of witnesses* refers to this exhortation in Hebrews 12:1–2:

> Therefore, because we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

This exhortation follows right after a long list of faithful saints in the First Testament, who died while still looking forward to the fulfillment of all of God's promises. If we "keep house" in the midst of this cloud of witnesses, of course, we will be encouraged by their faith and trust to persevere in the challenges of our own lives.

Thus, the Celtic saying invites us to live in the company of all the saints—both those alive and sharing with us in the same community and also those who are already living fully

in the presence of God. How much better we would discern if we were conscious that we dwelt in the midst of such a wise company as we together keep looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Besides being conscious in their discernment of the whole cloud of witnesses, monastic communities specialize in communal counsel. This has been true from the beginnings of Christianity, for it arose from Jewish roots, which are communal. Jesus Himself called twelve to be "with Him" as His closest community (Mark 3:13–19), sent out the seventy not alone but in pairs (Luke 10:1), and promised to be among them where two or three are gathered together in His name (Matthew 18:20).

At the beginnings of monasticism when Christianity needed reform, the Desert Fathers and Mothers, the first monastics in the fourth and fifth centuries in the Middle East, soon began gathering into communities that reached out with the Gospel to the people around them. The Good News of the Trinity would be more convincing to the society around us today if Christian communities were stronger in their sense of belonging to one another, in their care for each other, and in the vitality of their witness made possible by deeper discernment of who they are and how they might serve the world.

Francis of Assisi knew that his crucial decision concerning whether to remain in solitude or to preach required the counsel of the community. He sent brother Masseo to ask his two deeply spiritual friends Clare and Sylvester for their discernment—and they both said, "Preach!" He obeyed, believing that their wisdom was the word of the Lord.

Monastics, in general, model deep belonging together so well! At the Benedictine community in Minnesota where I go for retreats, I can hear lavish spiritual unity especially when the sisters sing psalms together, for the blend of their

voices is deepened because of the profound fellowship of their life together—just as the unity of a touring concert choir becomes more sumptuous the longer the members live together and grow in their knowledge of each other and their affection for one another.

In Chapter Four, I mentioned a card the sisters gave me which lists the Core Benedictine Values. One of the first specified is "*Community:* We are committed to respecting each individual, forming stable relationships, receiving counsel from the community and affirming the common good." Notice that a major aspect of communal life is that an individual's discernment involves the counsel of one's sisters or brothers or both.

For this to happen outside the monastery and in local Christian communities, two essentials must be in place. There must be a community skilled in, and willing to, give counsel. And the individual must be open to the wisdom of the larger body and ready to receive it. Does the first exist in your church home?[5] Does the second exist in you?

People in North America hunger for community but don't know how to find it or build it. In addition, many societal forces keep folks from being together for more than mere acquaintanceship. Perhaps we would find more motivation to work at building community if we could sample some cases from other cultures of communal care and if we could see how communal discernment might be conducted.

## COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT—LATIN AMERICA

One day in Guatemala an Achí choir, made up entirely of volunteers, traveled for many hours in overloaded boats and then hiked many more hours across mountains to a remote

village to teach people Christian songs in their own language. When they finally got there late in the day, they saw that the congregation needed to plaster their church building, so the Achí choir decided to carry sand from the river and get to work. The local people didn't think it could be done, but the choir corporately took the lead and the project was finished. That dramatic incident sent by my friend Carol Barrera displays graphically the positive side of communally dependent decision making.

It is hard to believe that the choir did all this after such an arduous journey. Such an immense gift seems to me to be possible only in cultures formed in habits of communal care and profound faith-put-into-action. The choir members decided together ("It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us") that they could be the ones to help the congregation with its much-needed construction work.

## COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT—AFRICAN COMMUNITIES

Barbara Robertson, who was introduced in Chapter One, wrote from Haydom Lutheran Hospital in Tanzania that the people with whom she worked employ several gifts of the community when making decisions. From the cloud of witnesses, they use a lot of African proverbs and seek direction through the Scriptures. Also, besides spending much time in prayer until their hearts feel settled and at peace, they discuss the issue with trusted and respected people.

Another missionary, whom I met at a conference and who served in Asia and also in Tanzania for many years, reports that when he was first in Tanzania, the head evangelist in an area (someone who had been to Bible school and was

responsible for supervising several local evangelists) told him that after the worship service in a village congregation they would be going to the home of a young couple who needed some counseling.

He was surprised that the entire church council of the congregation went to that couple's home. When they arrived, the elders simply told the young man what he was doing wrong and what he needed to do right. When they had finished telling him what they had discerned together, they went home.

The missionary pastor (who hadn't needed to say a word) was quite surprised at the elders' forthrightness and the young man's openness, respect for, and obedience to, the elders. In fact, a year later, when the pastor visited that village again, the young man came to him after the worship service and thanked him for saving his marriage!

Another story that this pastor told me gives us insight into the source of that young man's receptivity and respect. In the small Tanzanian town where the pastor and his wife lived, there was no electricity, and the economy was bad so many people could not afford to buy kerosene for their lamps to obtain light after dark. Because the people did not go out after dark, the missionaries wondered what folks did in their dark houses without radios or televisions or lights.

The pastor asked a small neighbor boy one day what he and his family did at home after dark. He wrote that the small boy "gave me an incredulous look that said, 'Where are you coming from?' His answer was simple, 'We talk.' My immediate reaction to that was, 'You lucky kid!' Every evening he sat with his extended family and talked."

How much it might change our respect for one another and our receptivity to one another's counsel if we spent evenings together talking and learning to listen! How much

more accurately we might discern our right place in the world if we learned better from others who we truly are!

My husband's fifth-grade students always rebelled initially when national "Turn Off the TV" week came around, but usually by the end of the week they were discovering all sorts of wonderful things about their families and themselves. Maybe some of our gadgets are destructive to our communal life and ought to be viewed with greater caution.[6]

In Alexander McCall Smith's novel *Tears of the Giraffe,* Mma Ramotswe can't imagine what it would be like if a person were not closely connected to a community of any kind. She realizes that for unfathomable reasons, some "white people" seemed to be content without relationships, but she envisions that they must be terribly lonely—"like spacemen deep in space, floating in the darkness, but without even that silver, unfurling cord that linked the astronauts to their little metal womb of oxygen and warmth."[7]

How dreadful that image makes the lives of many of us seem. I went back to a family reunion in Wisconsin a few years ago and was deeply moved to reconnect with my mother's first cousins and their children and grandchildren, cousins twice and three times removed from me, but immediately close as kin. One of Mom's cousins gave me pictures of my mother as a child. I am overjoyed now to display in my dining area a portrait of my mother together with her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. That connects me to four older generations of my people and a way of life on the farm from which I am too much detached.

How grateful I am, therefore, that in the church community I have another web of relationships—new brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles in Christ—from whom I can receive counsel and guidance. But it will take a great deal of

work to build most churches into the kind of community that makes genuine relational discernment possible.

We loved it that for several years my husband and I were able to belong to an African-American congregation in which we were uncle and auntie to all the children of the community. I miss that communal intimacy, which is more naturally a part of Africans' understanding of themselves. Only such a culture in which all the people perceive themselves more communally than personally could make possible such an entity as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.[8]

## ASIAN PATTERNS OF COMMUNITY

That the Chinese people value "collective wisdom" is illustrated by some proverbs sent to me by Daniel Chan, the translator from Hong Kong introduced in Chapter Three. The first is "Three mediocrities with their wits combined is better than Zhuge Liang, the mastermind." Daniel explains that Zhuge Liang, a very famous historical figure in China, was the prime minister of a kingdom in the era of the "Three Kingdoms" (A.D. 220–280). The story of his famous talents in the military and elsewhere has become popular among the Chinese through a historical novel called *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms.*

Two other proverbs accentuate the importance of the elderly being part of that collective wisdom. "If one does not take heed to the advice of the aged, one will soon suffer losses" and "An old person is like a treasure to the family." Would that the input of senior citizens were more widely valued in North America and the elderly themselves more passionately cherished as active members of the community!

In addition to the Chinese tradition of asking for blessings from the elders, as mentioned in Chapter Four, the missionaries who were introduced there, Kaori Chua (Japanese) and her Chinese (Singaporean) husband, How Chuang Chua, described for me the supreme valuing in Japan of relational harmony and consideration for others. They said that these moral values lead to a strong sense of community. Many Japanese argue that individuals should not act outside of the group, as is emphasized by the Japanese proverb "The nail that sticks up will be hammered down."

We might say that such communal care is essential in such a supremely crowded land as Japan, where the world's seventh-largest population of 125 million people dwells in a small area in which only 10 percent of the land is livable. But such dense conditions would not necessarily lead to the wonderful Japanese process called *nemawashi* (pronounced "nay-mah-wah-she"), which means that one talks to everybody.

Kaori explained that *nemawashi* literally emphasizes "circling around." She gave the example of the process of transplanting a big tree. About one or two years before the transplant, the person desiring it will dig up the surrounding soil and leave a big main root, but cut off all the little roots. In the same way, a leader will deal with little problems by settling them so that there is less controversy in making a major decision.

Kaori said that Japanese culture can overuse or abuse the word *nemawashi* if one avoids talking to those people who might object to a certain course of action. However, when the process is positively employed, it really keeps harmony. Then the group can modify a decision according to the needs of those who disagree. Kaori's husband, How Chuang, confessed that at first he thought this process took too much

time, but gradually he realized that at the end there are better decisions made and more harmony achieved.

Imagine what might happen in North American culture if participants in a group decision-making process did not try to resolve the issues hastily by means of majority vote but instead "circled around" and heard all the concerns of everyone present so that whatever was causing apprehension could be addressed.

## THE AUSTRALIAN EMPHASIS ON COMMUNITY

The positive side of a sense of community equality was pointed out to me by a native of Australia, whom I met when she was serving as the chaplain at St. Deiniol's Library in Hawarden, Wales (where I was studying monastic founders for this project). Kathy said that her Aussie compatriots have one advantage over North Americans and Europeans in their cultural habits because the first immigrants were originally convicts who resented what they called the "tall poppies," people of influence and power. To this day, she reported (and my teaching experiences in Australia confirm it), the whole nation has an ethos of equality. Kathy and I both long for that equity to be fully extended to the Aboriginal people, and we have seen evidence that now that goal is increasingly becoming the case. The phrase "We wouldn't want to be a 'tall poppy'" is quite common and underscores the ethos that no one in Australia wants to be elevated above one's peers.

Of course, there can be disadvantages to this ethos if it causes people to cease striving for excellence or if it leads to a dearth of leaders. Every good habit or practice sketched in this book can become negative if taken to an extreme.

In a conversation with me and more thoroughly in a paper he wrote, Chris Gilbert, also a native Aussie, highlighted the idea of "mateship" as a chief social value of Australia. People will go to great lengths—even dying—for their mates because this is such a strong community ideal. One important hero for the Aussies is a Private Simpson who used a donkey to carry wounded men out from Gallipoli and died in the process.

Gallipoli was the site of a disastrous offensive in which, alongside British and French troops, a large number of volunteers from the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) tried vainly (largely because of bungled leadership) to launch a campaign against the forces of the Ottoman Empire in the Dardanelles, the area of a Turkish peninsula on the Mediterranean, southwest of Istanbul. April 25, 1915, the date of the invasion in which both sides suffered severe losses, is remembered and celebrated each year by New Zealand and Australia as Anzac Day for its contribution to the national identity of both.

All wars have heroes and significant legends of folks who went to great lengths for their comrades. However, the fact that for Australia a primary story of national identity is not one of a famous leader or a mighty person but of a private who sacrificed to care for his mates illustrates the greater emphasis in that country on equality and community.

## MENNONITE DISCERNMENT OF THE SPIRIT

The religious denomination in which I have experienced the deepest sense of equality and community and the most skilled culture of discernment is the Mennonites. Two different pro-

cesses which they customarily use—one for community decisions and one for private, individualized ones (with communal guidance)—offer tremendous potential for all of us to make better choices because we are given the counsel of a caring fellowship.

Recall that in Acts 15 the early Christians made a decision about new Gentile members because "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (v. 28). This biblical precedent underlies the Mennonite practice of finding consensus when a congregation needs to make a decision.

I experienced this process of consensus gathering first when I wanted to join a Mennonite congregation (for reasons to be explained in the next chapter) during the time that I lived in South Bend, Indiana, to do graduate studies at the University of Notre Dame. Because I had been baptized as an infant in the Lutheran church of my family heritage, the leaders determined that the question of my membership in their community should be a matter of congregational consensus. (I was always welcome to visit, but membership is taken much more seriously in Mennonite churches because both the congregation and the new member make serious commitments to each other to care for one another and to participate in the mission of the community together.)

On the morning of the discernment process, I was asked to make a brief presentation of the importance to me of my infant baptism and of the nature of my faith in God as a result, because Mennonites actually first arose in protest to the requirement (often without faith) of infant baptism in countries where the state churches demanded it. In response to my faith statement, all the congregation members, who were seated at tables of eight, wrote down what they believed was the best procedure to follow concerning my request for membership.

I, who had never experienced such an event before, found the process exceedingly interesting. At their tables, the individuals wrote down and passed their comments to the person on the left so that everyone's remarks were read aloud objectively by another person. Then each table came to a consensus about whether or not my membership appeal should be accepted. Then the consensus of each table was brought to the entire group, and a final consensus was reached to invite me into membership.

In connection with that decision I learned that the process of consensus building does not necessarily mean that everyone has to concur exactly as an agreement is being formulated. All reservations are included in the final process. One member of the community, a philosophy professor, told me his concern that technically I could not be an "Anabaptist" (or one who denies the validity of infant baptism and chooses instead to be "baptized again"—the literal meaning of the word—as an adult). Nonetheless, he thought it was a good idea for me to be a member of the community (and, in fact, he and his wife were the ones who gave me a ride to worship and Bible class each week). Because of how valuable my baptism as an infant has been to me throughout my life, I totally agreed with his reservation and was and am delighted to participate with him and the other members in the community's mission in the world for my years in South Bend and still today by prayer from a distance.

The ritual in which the community and I made our membership promises to each other was equally moving to me, and I still consider myself deeply connected to that community even though I moved far away many years ago. Last year it was my privilege to preach for a Sunday morning worship service there, and I felt equally welcomed and at home with those dear friends.

Many of the reasons for my close connections with that Mennonite community will be mentioned in the next chapter, but here it is important to present another example of group decision making that powerfully affected my life and that offers to us all the possibilities of a great resource for better discernment.

There came a time when I wasn't sure I should continue in my graduate studies at Notre Dame, so one Sunday morning I asked the Mennonite pastor to pray for me as I tried to make a decision. He said, "I'll do better than that—I'll call a meeting to discern the Spirit." I had never heard that language before so I was eager to learn what a "meeting to discern the Spirit" was.

One evening soon thereafter ten or so good friends in the congregation gathered with me in someone's home. The leader explained that those community members would pray with me and ask me questions, that there might be long periods of silence in which people would ponder what they heard and would listen for the Holy Spirit's voice. After the process began with prayer for the Holy Spirit's guidance and for harmony in our mutual interaction, the group asked me to explain the decision before me and some of the reasons for my confusion. Then the questions began.

Some of the people asked me to clarify things I had said. Others wanted to know more about me, my goals and dreams, and needs that I observed in the world. Interspersed with fruitful silences, their inquiries seemed to be like a funnel channeling the issues into more orderly patterns than they had been in my own mind. I was overwhelmed that these friends were willing to give up an evening to help me so carefully to sort through my thoughts and options.

Near the end of the evening, the woman who gave me rides on Sunday mornings asked the question "How do you

envision your life?" My reply, "As a bridge," led to the further query, "What kind of a bridge?" I answered that I tried to serve as a bridge between denominations of Christians, between sides in denominational arguments, between the old and the young, between Christians and people of other faiths, between scholars and lay people.

She responded, "A bridge needs to be planted on both sides of the river." When I didn't understand that remark, she continued, "You are planted firmly on the lay people's side with your work in churches and through conferences and such, but what plants you firmly on the scholarly side?"

It was like a lightbulb went on. Suddenly, it was clear that my previous graduate degrees in several fields weren't sufficient, that it really was most desirable to bring my work together into a fusion through the Ph.D. program in which I was involved. When I voiced that insight, the rest of the group commented on their reactions, and, in the end, a consensus was reached, my decision was made, and final prayers of blessing sealed the finding.

What an amazing and Joy-full process! I promised myself after that evening that I would never make a major decision alone again. Ever since, members of the Christian community in scattered places have asked questions, prayed with and for me, and shared insights in various meetings to discern the Spirit on both minor matters and such important life issues as whether or not to accept my husband's proposal of marriage and whether or not to accept offers for faculty positions. Each time someone's question has provided a turning point, and the answers to my choices have become clear.

The Christians Equipped for Ministry (CEM) board, the group of seven people that oversees my work as a freelance theologian and determines the use of all of CEM's

funds, makes all of its decisions by consensus. If consensus is not reached on a particular matter, the group spends time in prayer and then discusses the issue again. If consensus is still not reached, the subject is tabled until a later meeting. We have never failed to reach total consensus on any matter for the twenty-seven years of CEM's existence. The practice of communal discernment has become indispensable to us.

Two other elements of the discernment processes—both for corporate, public decisions and for personal choices—should be pointed out for the sake of future possibilities of using these two processes in your own decision making. First, the Mennonite ideal is that no one speaks unless he or she can say, "I believe that the Holy Spirit is giving me this to say for the well-being of the community"—and the well-being of the individual if the subject is a personal matter. That practice prevents anyone from speaking too hastily or too selfishly.

In the other practice, the leader will purposely call on the quiet ones in the group to ask them what the Spirit might be teaching them for the benefit of the rest. That way, everyone is encouraged to participate in the process. The practice prevents anyone from dominating the conversation.

Both of these practices were evident in the two acts of discernment described in this section. When I mention these practices and processes in public lectures or discussions, any Mennonites present usually remind me that I shouldn't praise them too much (Mennonites generally are very humble) because they, too, don't always live up to their ideal practices. However, even as the New Zealanders and the Aussies in general manifest the character of attention to equality and mateship as portrayed in the preceding section, so Mennonites by and large seem to pay more attention to hearing what the Holy Spirit is saying through each and all members

of the community, without any one voice dominating, so that communal discernment can flourish for the sake of reaching consensus together.

It is my prayer that this chapter has whetted your appetite for deeper involvement in community and for the gifts of a community for your own (and perhaps your church's) decision-making processes. When we know more profoundly and listen more attentively to the God and the people to whom we belong, we make better decisions that reflect the character of that community and that God. In the final four chapters of this book we will look at some very helpful elements of communal character that enable the results of our discernment processes to be more beneficial for ourselves, our communities, and the whole world.