
On Communal Discernment

Otto Scharmer states in his most recent book *Leading From the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies* that “the quality of results produced by any system depends on the quality of awareness from which people in the system operate.” It would be appropriate to expand that idea and say that the quality of a discernment process for congregational leadership depends on the quality of awareness from which the individual and the collective operate. Personal and communal discernment depends on listening to one’s mind, one’s heart and one’s ‘gut’ and being open to the mystery and constant unfolding of the Holy Spirit---all very much components of ‘being aware’.

Ted Dunn, in his article *Election and Communal Discernment: Goals, Myths, and Gifts*ⁱⁱ states that “Discernment is intentional and requires a great deal of time if it is to be done well. Unlike a simple democratic vote, in discernment it is the Spirit, not the majority, that rules.” He goes on to say that “The communal discernment we are discussing seeks the election of the best leaders. It is, however, about more than just choosing leaders. Another goal is to engage you in the drama of a deeper story, your collective story, as it continues to unfold.”

The co-observing phase of going down the U includes the discipline of ‘seeing the field’ and ‘seeing with fresh eyes’. This involves noticing the *context, the deeper story, and the signs of the times that a congregation finds itself*. During this time of exploration, it is important to note the expectations that a congregation has on its leaders and its members. It is also important to identify what within the history of the congregation has worked and what needs to be ‘let go of’ in order for the emergent future to unfold. It is important to listen deeply to what is emerging within the individual and among the conversation partners. Questions must be framed that allows for insight, seeing with fresh eyes and noticing assumptions and places of resistance, cynicism or fear. This phase includes noticing both the internal and the external landscape of the system....it’s shadows as well as its virtues. Co-observing or ‘seeing the field’ requires sustained time and attention of the individual and the collective. A discernment process that uses three movements of the U and incorporates Ted Dunn’s wisdom about discernment may take the following form:

- Six to nine months prior to an election, processes are developed that engages both individual and communal exploration about ‘seeing the field’---in a comprehensive manner as mentioned in the previous paragraph. The use of journals, self-organizing conversation circles, community groups, etc. are possible ways in which individual and small groups might engage in this type of exploration and noticing. Exploration during this ‘co-observing phase’ also includes noticing the ‘signs of the times’ beyond the congregation. Issues relative to unmet needs, the Church, and responding in mission are all components of these initial conversations. The point of these processes is to raise awareness about the ‘context’ of leadership and membership for these times.
- During this time, congregations vary in the degree to which they ‘endorse’ particular people who may be seriously considered as possibilities for formal leadership roles. Many congregations are moving away from endorsing individual at this point, *and are choosing to*

wait for a formal nomination process to occur during the actual Assembly or Chapter. The assumption is that ALL eligible sister are potential ‘possible nominees’ for formal leadership; and the journey of exploring the context and expectations will help the body discern at the time of the gathering who among them is *being called for these times*.

- Conversations closer to the Assembly/Chapter that occur in self-organizing circles, community meetings, etc. may begin to explore *qualities and skill necessary for leadership* for these times and explore *possible persons who may be potential nominees*---but no formal endorsements or nominations would yet occur . All of these processes are deepening one’s awareness about the context of leadership---sharpening one’s awareness and opening one’s mind, heart and will to what is being revealed.
- Once the body is assembled for the Assembly/Chapter and the direction of the congregation has been determined, then formal discernment for leadership is initiated. The process at this point again focuses on what has been said about the context and signs of the times as well as the expectations that have been identified. Contemplative and prayerful processes are then introduced that invites a formal ‘nomination’ of persons who could faithfully and realistically provide the leadership needed for this moment in the congregation’s life. This is a moment of sitting at the bottom of the U and getting in touch with how the Spirit is moving within and among the body.
- Once the nomination process has occurred (wrapped in a contemplative and prayerful process); the individuals nominated have a window of time for their own personal discernment relative to this call—at least an overnight or 24 hour period. Once the nominees make known their discernment relative to continuing within the process as a formal nominee, then ongoing processes of exploring the remaining nominees continue. These ongoing processes culminate as the body moves to elections. The actual ‘election’ is an example of moving up in the U in an act of co-creating.

We are finding that congregations who enter into a process of waiting for a formal nomination process to occur during the Assembly/Chapter note that the presence of ‘politicking’ for particular persons is greatly minimized if not eliminated. If a congregation decides to wait for a formal nomination process to occur at the Assembly/Chapter, careful consultation with the constitution and directories must occur to guarantee integrity and legitimacy of the process. No one process is perfect; it is important that a congregation decide on a process that feels comfortable for them, that honors their constitution and directories and that allows for individual and communal discernment to occur prior to and within the actual Assembly.

Debbie Asberry

CommunityWorks, Inc.

August 2013

ⁱ Scharmer, Otto and Kaufer, Katrin. *Leading From The Emerging Future From Ego-Systems to Eco-System Economies*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers 2013

ⁱⁱ Dunn, Ted. *Review for Religious* 63.3