



***Prayer and Planning:  
The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada's  
Communal Discernment Model***

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## Acknowledgements

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*Aileen Van Ginkel  
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## Chapter One: Developing a Communal Discernment Model

In the fall of 2007, the staff of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC)<sup>1</sup> embarked on a journey of integrating communal prayer practices with strategic planning efforts. The path that we took over the next six months was shaped, on the one hand, by the practice of communal prayer that we formed and, on the other, by a modification of the “Appreciative Inquiry” model for strategic planning. What we were forging was, in fact, a process for “communal discernment.”

Our communal discernment model has brought together various streams of listening for God’s voice through reflections on God’s written Word and conversations with one another, and in relation to the broader context in which we are engaged. This kind of listening has provided for the EFC staff a means for moving ahead in response to God’s call to engage in the mission of reconciling all parts of the world to God through Jesus Christ. Communal discernment has become an integral part of our development as a “missional” community.

### ***Missional Community***

For the purposes of this paper, “missional” relates to the effort to break out of the “just us” rut, which so many Christian churches and organizations recognize they have fallen into. If the members of the community recognize God’s leadership position, and seek to be in tune with it, they will be on the move, always seeking to follow in obedient response. In the case of the EFC, it was our desire to move ahead with our mission under God’s leading, in terms that were faithful to God’s Word and in a manner that included all staff, which drove our “experiment” with communal discernment.

As various leaders around the world have pointed out, members of the Body of Christ are developing, or else see the need to develop, ways of understanding the purpose of the Church and how it should be structured that differ from concepts handed down from the recent past. Mission, in particular, is no longer left to the mission and ministry organizations that took on the task in the past; instead, mission - whether locally- or globally-focused - is seen increasingly to be the life-blood of the local congregation. Meanwhile, many of the organizations that took on the missional task in the past, while continuing to develop their roles of particular expertise, are seeing themselves as serving those congregations that are taking up the missional challenge.

New ecclesial models are required to meet the challenges posed by changing societal contexts and the rise of mission-minded Christ-followers. Such models are being fed by changing concepts around *leadership and organizational structures*, where the emphasis is on serving and empowering all members of the group to get the job done; *team-building and partnership development*, where the emphasis is on developing

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<sup>1</sup> The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) has, since 1964, gathered Evangelicals together for influence, impact and identity in ministry and public witness. Forty-one denominations (plus 5 observer denominations), 88 ministry organizations, 35 higher educational institutions and over 900 congregations are affiliated with the EFC. In addition, about 9-10,000 individual Evangelicals participate in the EFC’s ministry either as financial supporters or as participants in the EFC’s partnership and equipping ministries.

synergistic ways of working, in recognition of the variety of gifts bestowed by God on a variety of people; and the *spiritual disciplines*, where there is increasing appreciation for the need to integrate mission with specific prayer practices. All three elements have come together in the model of communal discernment that was developed by the EFC staff.

### ***Understanding “community”***

Before launching into a description of the model and its application, it will be helpful to describe “community,” one of the elemental terms in relation to “communal discernment.”

“Community” is often described in ways that suggest it is no more than the sum of its individual parts. In *Life Together*, however, Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes the Christian community as being more than a collection of individuals, because the individuals are bound together by the real presence of Christ in their midst. Through the mediating work of Jesus Christ, both between human beings and God and human beings with each other, “God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship...long before we entered into common life with [other Christians].”<sup>2</sup>

This foundation ensures that striving for Christian community is not about going after an impossible ideal. Rather, God’s foundation for community in Jesus Christ provides the contextual “divine reality” within which, however much we suffer disillusionment, we can come into true “spiritual community.”

The fellowship that we experience with one another within such a community must be understood as being indirect, writes Bonhoeffer.

Because Christ stands between me and others, I dare not desire direct fellowship with them...I must release the other person from every attempt of mine to regulate, coerce, and dominate him with my love...I must leave him his freedom to be Christ’s; I must meet him as the person that he already is in Christ’s eyes...Human love constructs its own image of the other person...Spiritual love recognizes the true image of the other person which he has received from Jesus Christ; the image that Jesus Christ himself embodied and would stamp upon all men.<sup>3</sup>

We can strive towards effecting such “spiritual community” because we are called to extend God’s love for us, through Christ, to others. John’s first letter articulates this call explicitly; Paul’s letters do so in numerous places as well. A clear Scriptural image of this community is found in relation to Paul’s “body language” (I Cor. 12:12-27); Jesus’ teaching about the vine and the branches (John 15) also depicts beautifully Bonhoeffer’s understanding of spiritual community.

A spiritual community can be understood in terms of its corporate identity and calling. If we think about how a group works over time, then we can see that there is an aspect to its existence that goes beyond the individuals who make up the group. A group

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community*, trans. John W. Doberstein, (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 28.

<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer, 35-36.

that seeks to undertake a particular mission, with reference to a vision and set of values (whether articulated or not), usually has continuity beyond the original members of the group. The way in which the mission is executed will change, given changes in the group composition and developments within the lives of the individuals themselves, but nonetheless corporate identity takes shape that helps to distinguish one group from another and allows for unique group expressions.

The idea that a group can seek to follow a unique call from God certainly echoes many biblical themes. Indeed, the Scriptures would suggest that group identity is a critical part of understanding how God works in human history. The Old Testament contains the story of all humankind in general, when it tells how the sin committed by Adam and Eve extends to all human beings. It also tells the story of the people of Israel in particular.

The understanding that we relate to God not only as individuals one on one but also as members of the “people of God” is carried into the New Testament in ways already referred to above. We are “living stones” being built into God’s “spiritual temple,” we read in I Peter 2<sup>4</sup>, and furthermore, “you are a chosen people. You are a kingdom of priests, God’s holy nation, his very own possession” (I Peter 2:5, 9a). As Peter goes on to say, it is because of this common identity that we share a common mission: “This is so you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light” (I Peter 2:9b).

The corporate nature of a group does not obliterate, however, the individual identities of the people that comprise the group. Nowhere do the Scriptures give the sense that individuals are not responsible for listening and responding on their own to God’s call to obedient living. The book of Judges, for instance, makes repeated references to the fact that the “Israelites [note the plural form] did what was evil in the LORD’s sight.”<sup>5</sup>

Given the picture of “spiritual community” that Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides, we should assume that God’s call to a group ought to be heard by each individual. It follows, then, that the more people within the group seek to hear God’s call to the group for themselves, through their relationship to the group in Jesus Christ, the more actively and directly they will respond to that call and engage in it. Furthermore, their ongoing response and engagement will be strengthened by their increasing sense that God is in their midst, that God is indeed the one who is leading.

The models for group direction that we have been accustomed to, however, would suggest that listening for God’s leading together is not necessary as long as one person, or a small core group, does the listening on behalf of the others. Certainly this model allows for less likelihood of confusion on the part of the group-members as to where the group should be heading, but it does beg the question as to whether each person in the group is truly engaged in responding to the call on the group from God or whether he or she is instead responding to the call on the group from the designated leader(s). Should we not respect the fact that God’s Spirit has entered into the hearts of each person in the group and that, therefore, each person has a role in listening to God speak to the group - indeed, has a responsibility to do so?

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<sup>4</sup> All quotations from Scripture are taken from the New Living Translation.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Judges 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6 and others.

While the human tendencies to want to maintain control over the group, or to abdicate responsibility to the leader(s), will need to be dealt with, the understanding of the nature of each individual within the group suggests that the role of the leader(s) should be one of ensuring that all members of the group have opportunity to reflect on, and contribute out of, what they are hearing from God as they each and all pray around the future direction for the group. If, in such a case, each person in the group is seen as critical to the role that the group is taking on in the broad mission of God, then ensuring that each person is connecting directly to the specific task of the group, and thus to God's greater mission to reconcile all things through Jesus Christ, will be critical to the group's missional effectiveness.

### ***Towards a Model for Communal Discernment***

The EFC's communal discernment model, which developed by EFC staff from the fall of 2007 into the spring of 2008, included two main components: a communal prayer practice and a strategic planning methodology. The interface between these components kept us listening to God, ourselves, one another and our missional context. Our attempt to integrate our prayer and planning processes was an effort to take seriously, in the words of Gordon Smith, the "inner witness of the Spirit." Smith writes, "We need to know, corporately, as part of our patterns of governance and decision making, how to attend to the Spirit and know what the Spirit is saying to the community as a whole."<sup>6</sup>

Knowing what the Spirit is saying to the community as a whole is critical, in Smith's view, because "we do not genuinely fulfill what God is calling us to be and do as a community unless we develop the capacity to hear together the voice of Jesus in our midst - his voice of assurance and comfort, but also his voice of call and guidance."<sup>7</sup>

Smith states that the ability of a group to listen to the voice of Jesus depends on its recognition that God speaks through the individuals that make up that group.<sup>8</sup> He challenges leaders in Christian communities to discard their discomfort "with the idea that the individual Christian, with a mind informed by the Scriptures, can truly know the voice of Jesus in his or her own heart and mind. They [should no longer] believe that it is their responsibility to tell their fellow Christians what they should hear and how they should act."<sup>9</sup> This does not mean that individuals do not need community; Smith argues instead for a balance between individual and community that avoids two errors: "the error of the West, which assumes the autonomy of the individual...[and] the error of the East, which subsumes the individual within the collective."<sup>10</sup>

Conversation and "being present to one another" are critical elements to the balance that Smith seeks to achieve. Another is to recognize, especially in the context of missional communities, that "we long to be part of communities and organizations that are

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<sup>6</sup> Gordon Smith, *The Voice of Jesus: Discernment, Prayer and the Witness of the Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 17.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, 209.

intentionally seeking to be responsive to the leadership of Christ.”<sup>11</sup> Quoting William A. Barry, Smith writes, “[t]here is, perhaps, no greater challenge to religion today than to foster the conditions that make communal discernment possible.”<sup>12</sup>

While Smith provides much valuable and detailed insight into the specifics of communal discernment, a question that could still be asked of him is, “What is the nature of the guidance that is given to communities as they listen to the voice of Jesus?”

Rose Mary Dougherty, in her book, *Group Spiritual Direction*, may be helpful in this regard. Dougherty suggests that we must be careful to know what we are looking for when we seek to understand God’s will for ourselves or our communities when she writes,

We have separated the will of God from God, and discernment has come to mean a search for God’s will which we must find in a game of hide-and-seek. We often equate discernment with a skill which we must master rather than the gift of God’s love which guides us home to Love.<sup>13</sup>

Dougherty’s words suggest that we ought not to expect that the voice of Jesus is going to be heard specifically at every point in our lives - Jesus is not a traffic cop issuing detailed directions on where we should go and how we should get there. A more helpful image is, perhaps, that of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. In this place, it is not so much a matter of being herded along specific paths every step of the way as it is of always being within range of Jesus’ voice. The field, in this image, does not have strictly fenced boundaries (we know this because of how easy it is to wander out of range of Jesus’ voice). Our challenge, both as individuals and as groups, is to remain within range, always ready to hear God’s cautions when we are straying away and also God’s specific directional commands when they are issued.

This is where the spiritual discipline of prayer comes into play. Remaining within range of Jesus’ voice requires of us a listening posture. Prayer in its different forms puts us into that posture, and allows us to listen for God’s voice not only during specific times set aside for such listening, but also during times when we are engaged in other activity.

A missional community will not be as likely to pick up on what God is saying in differing contexts if it is not engaged in the practice of communal prayer on a regular basis. Indeed, communal prayer times can help to set the stage or set the contextual framework within which God’s voice is not only heard but also understood.

Listening to God together could be seen as an exercise in chaos were it not for two things. First of all, if we truly desire to be led by God, we will not be disappointed. While God’s leading may not be as specific as we would like, or may be hard to follow at times, we can trust that God will always be in our midst.

Secondly, God has given us the Scriptures to provide us with a common reference to our listening. If we affirm that nothing we hear from God could ever be contrary to what God has said in Scripture, then we can be assured that we have what we need to stay within range of Jesus’ voice.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>13</sup> Rose Mary Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1995), p. 25.

Combining prayer and Scripture reading is, therefore, critical in any discernment effort. Meditative or contemplative prayer - listening prayer, in other words - opens our hearts to hear from God; reading Scripture, especially in a meditative way, gives us the language that can help us understand what it is that we are hearing.

Intentional prayer practices that incorporate Scripture-focused prayer are especially helpful in communal discernment settings. Here the desire is to diminish the volume of that one voice or set of voices that would dominate the voices of everyone else in the group. The intent, however, is not to mute those influential voices, but rather to hear them within the context that encourages every person to listen first of all to the voice of Jesus.

Communal discernment also requires organized ways of hearing those voices apart from specific prayer times. Gordon Smith recognizes that specified “prayer times” by themselves will not necessarily give a missional community the direction from God that it seeks. In this regard, he encourages those who “bristle at the thought that Christians and churches would engage in something so managerial” to recognize that,

[S]trategic planning is nothing more than the elemental task of asking and responding to the question, what are we being called to do in the next chapter of our common life? We cannot do everything and should not even try to do everything that we might consider doing. So, in the light of our mission, our charism, the resources available to us and the gifts and passions God has granted us, where will we invest our energies?<sup>14</sup>

In commenting on the value of engaging in strategic planning “in partnership with the principles of discernment,” Smith goes on to mention the “discipline” of Appreciative Inquiry in particular. “This more contemporary technique,” he writes, “may well be one of the most significant means by which we could facilitate communal discernment, because it is precisely the kind of tool we can use to open up a community to the witness of the Spirit.”<sup>15</sup>

As will be elaborated on below, Appreciative Inquiry was a major constitutive element in the model for communal discernment developed by the EFC staff. Because it requires a listening and discerning posture, this methodology complemented the communal prayer practice very well. Furthermore, its open-ended nature lent itself to being significantly informed by the themes that emerged from listening for God’s voice in Scripture, one another and our ministry context.

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<sup>14</sup> Smith, 244.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, 245.



## Chapter Two: Applying a Communal Discernment Model

### *Integrating Prayer and Planning*

Three principles guided the EFC staff's desire to listen for "God's agenda":

- 1) Future direction for the EFC was seen to depend on the staff's acknowledgment that "God is in it." We agreed that, unless we held the assurance that our planning activity rests on an obedient response to God's purposes, our best-laid plans would not bear worthwhile fruit.
- 2) In examining the current five-year plan for the EFC, we discovered that what we had was actually an annual plan extended over five years, rather than a strategic plan that envisioned new areas of ministry. What we needed was a plan that would include things we were already doing as well as things that we were not doing.
- 3) We agreed that one aspect of our previous approach to strategic planning that needed changing was the lack of participation by all staff. We determined that the integrated prayer/planning process that we were developing would include every person on the EFC staff, not just the senior staff.

The prayer practice that we used in tandem with the Appreciative Inquiry approach to strategic planning was drawn from the spiritual discipline known as *lectio divina* or "holy reading." This discipline encourages the practice of listening prayer: the reading is undertaken with an ear to hearing God's voice as one reads through the passage, while asking the following questions: 1) *Which word or phrase is surfacing in my heart and mind as I read this passage?*, 2) *How is my life touched by this word or phrase?* and 3) *What is God inviting me to do with what I'm hearing?*

A communal *lectio divina* approach to prayer, practiced weekly by the EFC staff throughout the planning process, took shape as follows:

- 1) After breaking up into small groups, we **listened** to the passage being read out loud.
- 2) As the passage was being read, we **asked** ourselves individually, *What rises to the surface in my mind or resonates within me as I hear these words?*
- 3) In our small groups, we went around the circle and **shared** what came to us during the reading. We waited in silence until each group had completed this sharing time (total time for sharing came to about 10 minutes).
- 4) Still in small groups, we went around the circle and **prayed** on the basis of what we had shared, thus speaking our reflections on God's Word back to God. Before we started this prayer time, we asked one person to volunteer to pray on behalf of the group later on (see #5 below). We waited in silence as each group completed this prayer time (total time for individual prayers came to about 10 minutes).
- 5) One person per group gathered the prayers of his or her small group into a summary "out-loud" prayer for all to hear. Thus, going from group to group, we **prayed together** out of our response to God's Word (total time for plenary group prayer came to about 10 minutes).

Scripture passages were sought by the process facilitator in reference to the relay of Appreciative Inquiry stages that we journeyed through (see the detailed descriptions of each stage below). Staff-members received advance notice of the Scripture focus for the weekly prayer time so that they could meditate on it individually beforehand. In addition, notes were taken during the “out-loud” prayer time, in order to capture some of what we believed we were hearing from God through the Scripture meditations; these notes were distributed to all staff-members as soon as possible following each weekly prayer time.

The choice of Scripture passages in relation to the prayer times was sometimes determined on the basis of selections volunteered by staff-members; most times, however, the choice came out of Scripture that was “living and breathing” for the process facilitator at the time. Over time many of us came to see the appointment of Scripture themes as part of God’s direct provision for the process.

In developing the integrated prayer/planning model, we recognized the importance of having input and evaluation along the way. A “Prayer/Planning Process Team,” comprising staff from every EFC department, was established prior to the launch of the process. This team, which met four times during the communal discernment period, provided constructive feedback and advice at points along the way.

The EFC senior staff (president and directors) was another group that had significant input and also decision-making responsibility at key times throughout the process. In January 2008 the EFC senior staff engaged in two activities: developing an overall guiding principle or “hedgehog concept” for the EFC’s future direction and determining priorities from among the many options generated by all staff throughout the “Dream” and “Design” stages of the process.<sup>16</sup> A meeting in February completed the process of pulling together a skeleton of an Annual/Strategic Plan. From there each director met with the staff in their departments to flesh out their particular piece of the Plan. The senior staff met again on March 6 to process the input from the various departments and also to evaluate the outcomes against the EFC mission, vision and strategic ends, as well as the “hedgehog concept” developed at the end of January. At its April 2008 meeting, the senior staff approved a final draft of the Annual/Strategic Plan, which was then submitted to the EFC Board for final approval in early May 2008.

### ***Timeline***

The EFC’s integrated prayer/planning experience progressed through the four main Appreciative Inquiry planning stages of Discover/Dream/Design/Deliver<sup>17</sup>. We added an orientation stage prior to, and an evaluation stage following, these four main planning stages. The timeline below outlines the key themes, Scripture focus and activities undertaken during the six stages.

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<sup>16</sup> The “hedgehog” idea is taken from Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don’t* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom. *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2003

	STAGE/THEME	SCRIPTURE FOCUS	ACTIVITIES
Sept. 5	<b>Preparation/Orientation</b> Senior staff discuss proposal		
Oct. 5	<b>Prayer/Planning Process</b> Team meets to discuss proposal		
	<b>Discovery</b>		
Nov. 22	Mission/Vision	Exodus 14:10-28	Mission-related questions (Survey #1)
Nov. 28	Mission/Vision #2	Joshua 1	Focus on mission continues
Dec. 5	What are we doing well?	2 Timothy 1:1-14	Spiritual Gifts (Survey #2)
Dec. 12	What could we do better?	Numbers 13-14	Our "Giants" / EFC issues (Survey #3)
	<b>Dream</b>		
Dec. 18-19	Prayer and Discernment	Acts 1:12-26; 13:1-4; 15:28-29	Senior staff meet; Process Team meets; Visioning exercise (all staff)
Jan. 10	God's leading power	Isaiah 48:17	Reflection on "Vision Themes" (Survey #4)
	<b>Design</b>		
Jan. 16	Comprehensive Fellowship	Ps. 133; 1 John 1:3,7; 2:24	Focus group brainstorming starts
Jan. 24	National Visibility	John 12:31-33; Phil. 2:5-11	Focus group brainstorming continues
Jan. 30 - Feb. 1	Incarnational Ministry	John 15:1-8	Process Team meets; Senior staff meet to develop "hedgehog" concept and to process input from focus groups
Feb. 6	Effective Equippers	Ezra 6:19-7:10	Reflection on "Strategic Themes" (Survey #5)
Feb. 11	Internal Alignment	1 Corinthians 12:12-27	Senior staff meet to develop objectives based on Strategic Themes
	<b>Delivery</b>		
Feb. 20	Need for Wisdom	Excerpts from Proverbs	Senior staff meet with departmental teams to

Feb. 27	Need for Commitment	Hebrews 12	develop components of the Annual/Strategic Plan Departmental team meetings continue
March 6	Need for Trust (in God, not ourselves or others)	Proverbs 3:5-6	Senior staff meet to process input from team meetings
March 12	Need for Trust (in God, not ourselves or others)	Proverbs 3:5-6	Final prayer time devoted to strategic planning themes; Evaluation (Survey #6)
<b>Evaluation/Wrap-up</b>			
April 24	Senior staff finalize plan		
April 29	Process Team meets		
April 30	Plan submitted to Board		
May 29	Ministry Year Launch		

As the timeline indicates, direct staff involvement in the process ended mid-March 2008. However, the task of assembling the parts of the Annual/Strategic Plan into a whole document required time during April, as did the steps of evaluating the process internally and obtaining board approval in May.

#### ***Stage One - Preparation & Orientation: What are we hoping to accomplish?***

The first stage of the EFC's integrated prayer/planning process took the form of consultation with EFC senior staff and the newly formed Prayer/Planning Process Team. At its October 5 meeting, the Process Team articulated the purposes and desired outcomes for the process as follows:

- Better understanding of goals and strategies (our own teams' and other teams')
- Community-building, unity
- Tangible, measurable deliverables
- Increasing our impact and influence
- Re-igniting our passion
- Annual and Strategic Plan

A key insight offered at this meeting was that the Annual/Strategic Plan would actually be a by-product of better understanding, unity and re-ignited passions; in that sense, the approach to integrated prayer/planning process was about much more than presenting a document to the EFC Board in May 2008. Indeed, the intent behind the process included the broader goal of building an intentionally "missional" community out of the disparate parts that were engaged in execution of the EFC's mission.

The overarching question for the Preparation and Orientation stage, *What are we hoping to accomplish?*, was answered initially by senior staff in terms of gaining all-staff input into the development of the Annual/Strategic Plan. The Process Team discussion broadened the answer to the question by placing primary emphasis on community development, with the Annual/Strategic being seen as a by-product of that development.

### ***Stage Two - Discovery: What does God want us to know?***

The prayer/planning launch event, held on November 22, 2007, bridged the orientation stage and the first of the Appreciative Inquiry stages. All EFC staff-members (minus three who could not make it through the morning snow storm) were re-introduced by Bruce Clemenger, EFC President, to the unique mission of the EFC. Afterwards each departmental team relayed to the others in the room its particular contribution to the EFC mission. At the end of our morning session, we undertook discussion around the EFC mission, vision and strategic ends - our board-designed “givens.”

After lunch we entered into an extended version of the group *lectio divina* prayer format. Just prior to the prayer time, we were introduced to the purposes for and approach to our integrated prayer and planning process. It was stated that we were entering together into a season of prayer and planning so that we could develop:

- ❖ A clearer sense of our common mission, vision and goals as staff to The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada;
- ❖ A comprehensive plan for carrying out our mission, vision and goals over the next 18 months (Annual Plan) and over the next 3-5 years (Strategic Plan); and
- ❖ A stronger understanding of ourselves as constituting a missional community.

Furthermore, we are seeking assurance on all levels that God is leading us together in all that we are and all that we do. Our commitment would be to:

- ❖ Hear God’s voice accurately;
- ❖ Hear God’s voice communally;
- ❖ Hear God’s voice for God’s missional purposes; and
- ❖ Hear God’s voice for action.

The process itself was introduced as having two components:

- ❖ A common set of Scripture passages around which to pray, meditate, share and with one another; and
- ❖ A common set of questions on which to focus our attention, going through the four themes or stages of Discovery, Dream, Design and Delivery.

The Scripture focus for the prayer time was Exodus 14:10-48 - the story of Israel going through the Red Sea and embarking on the journey to the Promised Land. Themes that came out of the prayer time included our need for trust in God’s leading and also in one another. We recognized our tendency to grumble and complain, but were also thankful for God’s promise to lead us and for God’s Word, which guides us. “Keep us focused on you, Lord,” we prayed.

The Discovery stage of the integrated prayer/planning process was a time for us to ask questions about who we were as a missional community: *What have we been called to do together? In what ways have we been doing this well? What are some of the roadblocks that have made it difficult to do this as well as we could?* Our prayer throughout this stage was that we would uncover, through the asking of these questions, the things about us that we needed to know in order to move ahead.

Three surveys were administered between November 22 and December 19 by way of the online “Survey Monkey” tool.<sup>18</sup> Staff-members had the option to complete the surveys

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com).

anonymously. The first survey focused on the theme of understanding mission and vision, and the second survey took up the scriptural theme articulated in Joshua 1: “Be strong and courageous!” The third survey flowed out of our prayer focus on Numbers 13-14 - another reflection on the experience of the people of Israel, this time in relation to preparations to enter the Promised Land. In our prayer time, we asked “for strength in facing up to our fears,” and also for the resolve not to “try to do everything on our own, but rather work out of [God’s] strength to defeat the giants ahead of us.”

The Discovery stage of the EFC’s communal discernment process uncovered several aspects of EFC organizational life, which were addressed directly and indirectly in the stages that followed. The themes developed in the Dream stage can in many ways be traced to the themes that emerged in the Discovery stage.

### ***Stage Three - Dream: What might we do together?***

The momentum for the Dream stage was created primarily through an all-staff gathering on December 19. Time for prayer, with a focus on passages from Acts that illustrate the role of the Holy Spirit in the decision-making practices of the early Church (Acts 1:12-16; 13:1-4; 15:28-29), was followed by a facilitated brainstorming exercise involving all of the staff participants.

In our prayer time, we recognized what God did through the apostles, and prayed that we too would listen and “submit our agendas” to God. We were thankful for the way God is speaking to us, although realizing that “we sometimes struggle to listen.” “Help us,” we asked, “to ensure that your wisdom and discernment are not a gloss on our abilities but are rather are interwoven with them.”

While in this listening posture, we went through a process of small- and plenary-group discussion, which culminated in the articulation of five themes, which we were later to call “Vision Themes”: Comprehensive Fellowship, National Visibility, Incarnational Ministry, Effective Equippers and Internal Alignment.

The sense at the end of the day was that we had articulated themes that everyone could get excited about. Furthermore, we had achieved something heretofore not experienced in EFC strategic planning: the foundational themes for our plan were not departmentally-defined but rather were themes that applied cross-departmentally. As a step towards greater unity and alignment within the EFC staff, the December 19 gathering was truly significant.

At the beginning of January, we spent time in prayer focused on a single verse from Isaiah: “‘The LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, says: I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is good and leads you along the paths you should follow (Isaiah 48:17).’” In response to this Scripture, we asked that God would “help us to feel in tune with the five themes.” We thanked God for “our devotion time, which is helping us to see the necessity for aim and purpose in our life and the need for fellowship and visible ministry.” We also asked God to “equip us to align together in our purpose” and to give us a “teachable spirit.”

Following this prayer focus, a fourth survey was administered, primarily to gather individual reflections on the five Vision Themes. EFC staff-members were invited to reflect on the five themes coming out of the brainstorming/discerning session on December 19,

and were then asked, “What resonates strongly with you in relation to what you believe the EFC is all about? Are there any gaps?”

The survey responses indicated that all five themes resonated with members of the EFC staff in different ways. Although there was wide variation on what the themes meant and how they could be enacted, each insight was valuable to an overall understanding. Very few gaps were identified; strong affirmation was given along the lines that “we’re going in the right direction.”

In some ways, this stage marks the watershed in the integrated prayer/planning journey that the EFC staff embarked on. The affirmation of the Vision Themes, which were foundational for the next two stages of the process, was a welcome indication that God had, in the words of one respondent, “been leading and guiding us through this crucial process.” As was indicated in several of the responses, however, assurance that we were on the right track would depend largely on how well the Vision Themes were developed into concrete plans for action and then carried out.

#### ***Stage Four - Design: What could we do together?***

The five Vision Themes served as the focus for our prayer times during the Design stage; they also provided a backdrop to the brainstorming activity we undertook in focus groups (defined departmentally) and the collating and prioritizing work undertaken by senior staff. The focus groups developed a set of strategic directions out of their individual discussions - 41 directions were identified in total; these were then placed by senior staff into six major “Strategic Theme” categories, which crossed all departmental lines.

Prior to taking on the collating/priority-setting work, senior staff worked with an organizational development consultant to draft a hedgehog concept for the EFC. While the impetus for the hedgehog discussion came from the need, recognized by senior staff in September 2007, to develop an overarching marketing plan for the EFC, the effort also had direct benefit to the process of evaluating what *should* be, the critical component to the next stage in the prayer/planning process.

Embedded in the midst of the focus group meetings and the senior staff meeting was the third meeting of the Process Team. The purpose of this meeting was primarily to keep the team-members informed of the twists and turns that the process was taking, especially as senior staff became more engaged in priority-setting. A key concept discussed at the Process Team meeting was the distinction between the Discovery, Dream and Design stages, which required full staff participation, and the Delivery stage, which required the decision-making efforts expected of senior staff.

Using Dr. Paul Magnus’ terminology, all EFC staff were engaged in answering the questions, *What is?* (Discovery); *What might be?* (Dream) and *What could be?* (Design), while the senior staff carried the decision-making responsibilities related to answering the question, *What should be?* (Delivery). A fifth survey administered mid-January indicated which Strategic Themes resonated most strongly with the EFC staff, and also brought out the importance once again of communications and of “long-term strategizing.” One person commented that an appropriate question in this regard might be, “What are we doing that we shouldn’t be doing?”

One of the survey questions asked whether or not we were “on track” in our prayer/planning process; most responses were positive variations on what one person stated: “Listening for the voice of God and hearing the voice of staff are key to setting focused missional direction from which we anticipate organizational participation.”

The Design stage of the prayer/planning process overflowed with ideas at all levels and in several directions. By the end of this stage, many were ready to ask the next question, *What should be?*

#### ***Stage Five - Delivery: What should we do together?***

In order to set the stage for determining the key priorities that were to go into the Annual/Strategic Plan, the EFC senior staff met to articulate objectives flowing out of the Strategic Themes. Senior staff recognized at their February 2008 meeting that these objectives needed to be supplemented with the objectives related to the ongoing work undertaken by each director/departmental team. Using a common template, each senior staff-member was asked to develop specific action plans around the objectives assigned to them. It was at this point that every EFC staff-member was re-engaged in the planning process; the result was a first draft of the Annual/Strategic Plan.

Meanwhile, all continued to participate in the Scripture-focused prayer times. We addressed themes that related to the Delivery stage of the planning process: the need for wisdom (excerpts from Proverbs), the need for commitment (Hebrews 12) and the need to trust in God and not ourselves (Proverbs 3:5-6).

The notes taken during the prayer times indicate an ongoing emphasis on the importance of listening to God and of staying focused on God’s leading, even and especially through the hard times. The final focus passage from Proverbs summarized where we had come to in many ways. We prayed at that time for God to continue to show us the way to go. “We’re joined for common purpose,” we said in our prayer; “Please help us to trust in you first and then build up trust in one another that is based on your presence in our lives.”

While praying for wisdom and for commitment, we worked on specific action plans in relation to the objectives that were determined to be central to the ongoing work of the EFC. As we prayed for trust in God and not ourselves, senior staff took on the hard task of evaluating the various aspects of the combined action plan, which had emerged from the departmental work, in order to determine which aspects would go forward in the final draft of the Annual/Strategic Plan that was to be submitted to the EFC board in May. At a meeting in early March, senior staff went through a process of evaluating each line in the first draft of the Annual/Strategic Plan against critical measurements, including funding sources; articulation of measurable outcomes; alignment with the EFC mission/vision/strategic ends/hedgehog concept; and staff capacity. We concluded each of these evaluations with a consideration of implications for the Annual/Strategic Plan.

The evaluative activity undertaken by senior staff comprised the final step in answering the *What should be?* question. From here the Annual/Strategic Plan went into revision and, following a meeting with senior staff towards the end of April 2008, a revised draft was submitted to the EFC Board.



***Stage Six - Wrap-up and Evaluation: What did we accomplish and how well did we do it?***

A final staff gathering was held in relation to the integrated prayer/planning process on May 29, 2008. This “Ministry Year Launch” event provided occasion for Bruce Clemenger to present the board-approved Annual/Strategic Plan to all staff. Some small- and plenary-group discussion brought questions of clarification to the surface, and some minor changes to the Plan were made. The afternoon session of this day was devoted to brainstorming around a key element in the Plan.

A final survey helped to wrap up the prayer/planning from an evaluative angle. Positive memories and “aha” moments centered on the time given to hear from all staff and the excitement around a growing clarity regarding our common purpose. The respondents stated clearly their sense that God had indeed been present in the process.

Identified downsides to the process varied: some said there was not enough time together as a whole staff; others said the process was too time-consuming. A concern was raised that - especially in the larger-group settings - it was easy for some voices to be missed. One person wondered whether communication around the process and its outcomes had provided enough clarity to staff; another questioned the wisdom in “basing so much on the provided scripture texts - it’s a method that requires trust in the text-chooser and could in less trusting settings raise concerns about potential manipulation.”

Many of the suggested improvements to the process focused on the staff prayer times; others focused on communication, especially beyond the establishment of the plan to progress reports on the changes taking place. Two respondents addressed the question of staff roles; one stated that “some staff would enjoy more opportunities to weigh in on the nitty-gritty of choosing priorities among various programming options,” while another wondered whether all staff would be involved in evaluating the success of proposed changes. When it came to identifying gaps, many of the themes addressed in relation to shortcomings were reiterated; an additional insight was the possibility of having had a representative of the EFC Board at one or more of the staff gatherings.

The Prayer/Planning Process Team, established in October 2007, had good insight and course-adjustment suggestions to offer along the way; some of its most insightful evaluations came at the end of the process. At its final meeting, the team members noted that the key factor in evaluating the success of the prayer/planning endeavour was clear communication regarding the steps in the process and their significance.

Many team-members indicated also that they were encouraged that the process would lead to a better connection and alignment to the EFC mission, provided there were tangible outcomes to the process. Positive responses were given to the question of God’s presence in the process. Team-members indicated that it might be beneficial to continue the process into the future, but that tangible outcomes from the process so far, as well as clear communication on those outcomes, would be essential.

A full answer to the question, *What did we accomplish?*, is difficult to answer within the timeframe of this report on the process. As members of the Prayer/Planning Process Team noted, much depends on the longer-term outcomes of the process. The submission of the Annual/Strategic Plan to the Board is in some ways only a token of the change that could ensue from the process in terms of missional alignment, community development and

the sense that God is in the midst of us leading us into new directions. What remains to be seen is how what we discovered in our journey, what we dreamed about and designed, as well as what we planned to deliver, will fall out in future.

The evaluations suggest that the best of what we did relates to initiating changes in “organizational culture.” Including all staff-members in the process and integrating the process with communal prayer practices were two elements that were highly appreciated.

## Chapter Three: Testing the Communal Discernment Model

### *Lessons Learned*

The hypothesis that led the staff of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada to engage in developing an experimental communal discernment process was that prayer practices and strategic planning processes could be combined to effect a greater understanding of God's leadership in the organization. We believed that it was possible to develop the listening postures necessary to following God's lead into places of missional intent and activity that we would otherwise not have thought of. We also believed that it was possible to include all of the EFC staff in this listening process.

This hypothesis, as we experimented with it, was confirmed by the end of our communal discernment period, but it was considerably broadened as well. In our desire to listen to God, we discovered the centrality of God's written Word as it directed and affirmed our understanding of God's spoken Word. The unfolding of our communal prayer practice as a variation on Scripture-focused *lectio divina* came to be the cornerstone of all that we did.

Almost everything that we learned about prayer since we embarked on the process in November 2007 has affirmed for us how important it was that we viewed prayer as integral to our process. A comment made during the January 30 Process Team meeting demonstrates the central role of prayer: "I'm excited," said one person, "to be able to connect to the mission of the EFC through our prayer emphasis." Bringing the EFC and its needs into focus in our ongoing staff devotion periods has helped us to see ways in which our daily work links to God's vision for the EFC.

The Scriptures that we used to focus our prayer times were instrumental in giving us reminders of how God has worked with faithful followers in the past; it also - by becoming so relevant to our daily work - became alive for some of us in exciting ways. We called our approach "Bible listening," rather than "Bible study" (not downplaying the importance of the latter), and rejoiced in what we were hearing God say to us and our situation through Scripture. In many cases, the focus passages gave us common language for identifying or approaching issues, e.g., naming the "giants" standing in the way of our effectiveness as a missional community.

We also recognized that the format of the prayer times that we had developed was most relevant in the context of communal discernment. After our intentional communal discernment period had ended, what mattered most was that prayer was seen to have direct relevance to the EFC community and was intentionally woven into our daily work routines.

Another major learning area was in relation to the planning methodology that we used. In looking back, it is clear that the Appreciative Inquiry process lent itself uniquely to a "listening" approach to prayer-based planning. Because it is oriented around a series of questions, none of which have preconceived answers, we benefited greatly from the Appreciative Inquiry approach. In working with categories borrowed from the Appreciative Inquiry methodology, we ended up with a model that integrated communal prayer with

communal visioning and decision-making; this integration was at the heart of the communal discernment model that we developed.

One of the elements of Appreciative Inquiry that was downplayed more than it should have been, however, is the focus on the positive rather than the negative, strengths rather than weaknesses. We need to ask ourselves, did we pay too much attention to our weaknesses as we developed the Annual/Strategic Plan or were we truly being led by our strengths as we came to understand them in prayer? In any case, a lesson in this area is to let the positive discussion take the lead role, recognizing that it is out of those places where we have acted in accordance with our strengths and have experienced God's blessings on "the work of our hands" that we will learn best where God is taking us.

The process that we engaged in was not just about listening to God through Scripture; it was also about listening for God's voice as we reflected individually, as we listened to one another and as we studied the missional context in which we have been placed. However, while staff-members were encouraged to take the time to read in advance the Scripture passage designated for the week, the emphasis in our model was on the weekly, communal prayer times held in the Markham and Ottawa offices of the EFC. The idea was to bring what we heard in our individual prayer times into our communal prayer times; this was not, however, emphasized as strongly as it perhaps should have been. Future use of the communal discernment model needs to be complemented by a much greater emphasis on the need to nurture individual discernment simultaneously with communal discernment.

We were reminded many times that a primary way in which God spoke to us was through the words of others, sometimes in the context of Scripture-focused prayer and other times through the surveys and our various meetings. Listening well to one another requires that we trust what others in our community are saying, but that trust must be based not in who those people are but in our discernment that what they are saying resonates with God's words. The weight of our trust thus falls on our assurance in what God is doing through other persons, not on the persons themselves. Such discernment requires one again that we as individuals are listening to God; without that, we would have no basis on which to discern God's words in what others are saying.

In the context of a missional community, a fourth dimension needs to be added to the circular dynamic of listening to God-self-others. Understanding our context in terms of the constituency that we serve and our broader cultural/societal/political environment is critical to moving forward in our missional mandate. To do this well, we need to listen to our context, inquiring as to its nature and understanding both what it offers and what it needs. In the case of the EFC experience, this element was present, but was not perhaps brought to the surface as fully as it could have been.

### ***Comparing with other communal discernment models***

Gordon Smith, in *The Voice of Jesus*, describes both the necessary conditions and a process for communal discernment. The conditions he outlines include: a common understanding about the community's common purpose; a resolve to decide together; mutual regard and acceptance; a clearly framed matter for discernment; and good information and

research.<sup>19</sup> Once these prerequisites are in place, suggests Smith, a group can move on to the business of communal discernment. Such a group, in his view, should comprise no more than six to eight individuals; if a larger group needs to make a decision, then it should delegate the discernment process to a smaller group. While the discernment process would include “regular interchange” between the smaller and larger groups, the discernment task “will still be focused on this smaller company of individuals.”<sup>20</sup>

In Smith’s model, a typical “meeting to discern” would progress through the following elements (each element taking about thirty minutes):

1. Open-ended conversation where all members of the group are free to lay out their perspectives on the matter at hand;
2. Prayer and silent reflection where the group-members seek “the actual presence of God, by the Spirit, in and through and around the process...Jesus needs to be at the table, an active participant in the discussion”<sup>21</sup>; and
3. Discussion toward resolution, which begins by sharing insights arising out of the prayer and where potential areas of agreement are tested in order to reach a consensus or where areas of disagreement are clarified to determine whether minority voices are actually “part of the Spirit’s guidance of the group.”<sup>22</sup>

Smith recommends that any decisions reached through this discernment be confirmed by means outside of the group itself. He concludes, however, that while this step will give the group a measure of confidence in its conclusions, “in the end, our confidence rests not on our capacity to choose well but on the loving and providential care of the God who guides and whom we long to hear.”<sup>23</sup>

The model for communal discernment developed by Gordon Smith rests on the assumption that God speaks to us and that we can hear the voice of Jesus as we make decisions. This assumption was shared by the EFC staff as it developed its model. A major area of difference, however, relates to the matter of group size. What the EFC experience demonstrates is that it is possible to include a larger group in the discerning process, without delegating the discernment role to a smaller group. Although there does come a point where the group’s leader or leadership team needs to sift through the input generated by the discernment process and make decisions on that basis, it is possible to expand the discernment group beyond six to eight people.

In *Discernment: The Art of Choosing Well, Based on Ignatian Spirituality*, Pierre Wolff, like Gordon Smith, enters into a description of communal discernment process by pointing out important prerequisites. In this regard, he indicates the necessity of, first, recognizing the inherent difficulties in group decision-making and, secondly, identifying a common starting point. Wolff imposes a third condition, saying, “A communal discernment

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<sup>19</sup> Gordon Smith, *The Voice of Jesus*, 236-240.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, 260.

deserves to be qualified as discernment only if each member of the group has acquired through practice the capacity of discerning personally.”<sup>24</sup>

Having established preliminary considerations, Wolff proceeds to describe not so much a method of coming to agreement as a method of screening the results of any consensus that might arise out of brainstorming, small group discussion and so forth. In Wolff’s communal discernment model, “screening with indifference” is an essential tool that a community needs at this stage.

Here Wolff relies heavily on the individual and communal discernment practices of Ignatius of Loyola and the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). “Holy indifference,” as Ignatius used the term, means “absence of compulsion toward one thing or another... marked by no special preference for one thing or another...with an emphasis on a freedom that [is] not hindered by the influence of affective reactions, our ‘passions’...”<sup>25</sup> If this kind of indifference is present, Wolff indicates, “our screening is always led by the values, faith, and goals we *all prefer* [his emphasis].”<sup>26</sup>

Such indifference will also enable us to properly incorporate the second element of testing a decision, namely, knowing that we have listened to one another well, as we seek to discern “*the evangelical values and the elements of the Good News* that are present in someone’s remarks [his emphasis].”<sup>27</sup> The third “absolutely necessary” element in Wolff’s decision-testing process is prayer. Here again Wolff refers to the necessity of indifference, which, he says, is “a gift of the Spirit of Christ” and “a grace that must be asked for.”<sup>28</sup>

It may be helpful for comparison purposes to examine Wolff’s description of the experience of Ignatius of Loyola and his companions as they set about making decisions related to the establishment the Society of Jesus. In seeking to discern their best ways forward, group-members would pray together and then alone, recognizing the importance of taking time between their gatherings so that each could go into solitude apart from possible group influence, using the principles for personal discernment that centered on inculcating holy indifference. Group-members would designate separate meetings to discuss, at one time, the pros and, at the next time, the cons related to a pending decision; at either meeting, they were all arguing for the decision or all arguing against it, thus promoting unanimity in each case. By the time the decision needed to be made, the way forward would have appeared clear to all, and the end result was a harmonious decision.<sup>29</sup>

The major contribution that Pierre Wolff makes to the ongoing development of a communal discernment model is the emphasis on individual discernment as the foundation for communal discernment. A different contribution to the development of the model comes from the detailed process described in *Discerning God’s Will Together*, by Danny Morris and Charles Olsen.

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<sup>24</sup> Pierre Wolff, *Discernment: The Art of Choosing Well, Based on Ignatian Spirituality* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori Publications, 1993, 2003), 92-93.

<sup>25</sup> Wolff, 62.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>29</sup> Wolff, 101-105.

Especially helpful is the description of the nine stages that a group needs to go through when making a communal decision. Morris and Olsen outline these stages as follows:

1. *Framing*: identifying the focus for discernment and bringing all related matters into the picture;
2. *Grounding*: identifying the guiding principles, such as values, beliefs and purpose, which will set the boundaries for the discernment process;
3. *Rooting*: connecting to the religious and biblical stories and themes that will influence the process;
4. *Listening*: hearing the promptings of the Holy Spirit and the voices of all those in the discerning community and those who may be affected by the outcome of the process;
5. *Exploring*: freeing up the imagination to identify different options that are possible to follow within the boundaries set for the process;
6. *Improving*: through consulting and prayer, fine-tuning the results of the exploration process;
7. *Weighing*: sorting and testing the various options that have opened up;
8. *Closing*: selecting a particular option or options; and
9. *Resting*: taking time to determine whether the decision brings feelings of consolation or desolation.<sup>30</sup>

It is interesting to note that this final step again hearkens back to the discernment process developed by Ignatius of Loyola. As described by Pierre Wolff also, a decision can be tested by the feelings that arise from it: “consolation” carries with it a sense of peace and movement toward God; “desolation” brings with it a sense of distress and movement away from God.<sup>31</sup>

Parallels can be drawn between the model developed by Morris and Olsen and that developed by the EFC staff. Our first stage of orientation included the step of *framing*, in that we clearly stated that our end goals were the development of an Annual/Strategic Plan and a greater sense of who we were as a missional community, through an integrated process of prayer and planning. By looking to the “givens” of mission, vision and strategic ends, as developed by the EFC Board, we also included the step of *grounding* in our orientation stage.

In the EFC model, *rooting* and *listening* were woven throughout and undergirded the process, rather than being treated as specific steps that needed to be taken prior to other steps. However, the “Discovery” stage certainly focused on specific means of listening to staff perspectives. *Exploring* describes well the “Dream” phase of the EFC model, in which we developed our “Vision themes,” and *improving* on those themes was a major part of our “Design” activity, as we developed our “Strategic themes” through various staff focus groups. When we entered the “Delivery” stage, we were engaged in activities that resemble *weighing* and *closing*. Finally, although we did not use the

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<sup>30</sup> Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997), 78-79.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 79. Cf. also Wolff, 37-57. Note that listening accurately to one's feelings of consolation or desolation depends again on the presence of indifference.

concepts of consolation/desolation to guide it, we did go through a type of *resting* process when we evaluated the outcomes of our discernment process. While the parallels between the Morris/Olsen model and the EFC model are evident, the greater detail in the steps outlined in the former could offer a greater level of precision and intentionality to the latter.

Guy Saffold, in *Strategic Planning for Christian Organizations*, does not call his approach “communal discernment”; however, he offers a model that relates well to the one developed by the EFC staff. The process that Saffold unfolds proceeds through nine steps, many of which resonate with those proposed by Morris and Olsen and also - with one important exception - the Appreciative Inquiry approach. Saffold’s process includes the following steps:

1. *Plan for planning*: taking the time to map out the process in advance;
2. *Mission*: clarifying the purpose of the organization;
3. *Strategic vision*: developing a vision for the future that emanates from the mission;
4. *Environmental scan*: identifying trends, both internal and external, that will impact the organization;
5. *Status analysis*: reviewing the strategic vision in light of the results of the environmental scan;
6. *Major issues*: identifying those things the organization needs to address if it is to fulfill its vision;
7. *Strategic initiatives*: developing strategies that, taking the issues into consideration, will lead to the fulfillment of the vision;
8. *Operational planning*: ensuring the integration of strategic goals and plans into daily operations; and
9. *Results management*: evaluating results to determine whether or not the organizational mission and vision are being fulfilled.<sup>32</sup>

The major difference between Saffold’s approach and the Appreciative Inquiry method is to be found in the placement of the environmental scan and status analysis steps in relation to vision development. In Saffold’s case, the two take place following the articulation of strategic vision; Appreciative Inquiry, on the other hand, places “Discovery,” which contains elements of environmental scanning, before “Dream” or vision development. Saffold recognizes that strategic planning experts disagree on which should come first, and indicates the possible shortcomings of either placement: “When vision development precedes scanning,” he writes, “leaders may fail to analyze and respond to environmental conditions as fully and accurately as they should. When vision development follows scanning, the obstacles and challenges revealed by the scan could limit vision.”<sup>33</sup> Saffold recommends that, if vision development comes first, the vision must be re-evaluated in light of the scanning results - his “status analysis” step. If, on the other hand,

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<sup>32</sup> Guy Saffold, *Strategic Planning for Christian Organizations* (Fayetteville, Arkansas: Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges, 1994), 90-96.

<sup>33</sup> Saffold, 155.



scanning is done first, “the planners should ensure that the vision is not overly restricted by the obstacles and hazards they have reviewed.”<sup>34</sup>

It is out of a desire to ensure that weaknesses and threats do not shape a vision that the developers of the Appreciative Inquiry approach emphasize the importance of dwelling on strengths and opportunities during the Discovery stage. Their premise that “[c]ompulsive concern with what’s not working, why things go wrong, and who didn’t do his or her job demoralizes members of the organization, reduces the speed of learning, and undermines relationships and forward movement.”<sup>35</sup>

The “appreciative” element in Appreciative Inquiry comes into play by developing vision for a group on the platform of what is already working; the assumption is that it is better to direct organizational energies toward building on existing successful momentum than toward shoring up weaknesses and filling gaps. Viewed from this perspective, Saffold’s approach - because it emphasizes vision development before environmental scanning - could be integrated with communal prayer disciplines in order to develop an effective communal discernment model.

It is especially the “inquiry” element in Appreciative Inquiry that makes this approach so amenable to being combined with prayer into an integrated communal discernment process. David Cooperrider, in his preface to *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*, writes,

What I like most about this [book] is its precious attention to things not often talked about in human systems change. For example, the authors write, “Surprisingly little has been written about the experience of being heard” in organizations. Then they describe how Appreciative Inquiry creates not just organizations in which everyone has full voice - but organizations in which real listening, for a deep level of meaning-making, is the norm.<sup>36</sup>

When the purpose of a communal discernment methodology is seen to rest on listening for God’s voice, then a process that encourages full voice and real listening would seem to offer a helpful tool for effective discernment.

While many aspects of the communal discernment models described above resonate with aspects of the model developed by the EFC staff, the comparison between them reveals that the EFC model is unique in bringing together two distinct methodologies: one in relation to communal prayer disciplines and the other in relation to strategic planning. While many of the models described above hint at the feasibility of such an integration (Gordon Smith does so most strongly when, as noted in Chapter One above, he refers to the “appreciative inquiry discipline”), they do not specify what a prayer/planning combination could look like. Nonetheless, these models do suggest ways in which the EFC model could be improved. Before examining ways to strengthen the EFC model, however, we would do well to examine the critical nature of trust in any communal discernment process.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, quoted in Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2003), 11.

<sup>36</sup> Cooperrider, in Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, x.

### ***The Place of Trust in Communal Discernment***

A missional community's desire to listen for God's voice implies a desire to act on what the group hears. However, the group will not take action that carries widespread commitment if it does not trust the discernment process and its outcomes. The communal discernment model depends uppermost on listening; thus, it comes as no surprise that a key element to building and maintaining trust in the process and its outcomes is transparency in communication.

Stephen M. R. Covey, in *The Speed of Trust*, calls trust the "hidden variable" in any organization's success. He writes,

The traditional business formula says that strategy times execution equals results:  $S \times E = R$ ... But there is a hidden variable to this formula: trust - either the low-trust tax, which discounts the output, or the high-trust dividend which multiplies it:  $(S \times E)T = R$ .<sup>37</sup>

Covey isolates several factors which either decrease or increase the presence of trust in an organization, placing them in four major categories: integrity, intent, capabilities and results. In an organizational context, none of these factors can be known without communication. Covey recounts a turning-point experience in his own organization when he ditched a meeting's stated agenda in order to address underlying issues of trust. He writes,

At the end of the day, there was a renewed feeling of hope and excitement. One participant told me that I had established more trust in one day than I had in the prior several months. More than anything else, I realized, it was a starting place, an acknowledgment of the value of our transparent communication. I also realized that the real test, however, would be on how I followed through. At least now, people could see my behavior through new eyes, not tainted by the lens of low trust.<sup>38</sup>

As is evident in the quote above, transparency in communication will not accomplish everything in terms of maintaining trust over the long run, but it is where we need to start. Going back to our communal discernment model, then, we need to ensure that there is transparency in how we listen for God's voice.

We need to acknowledge first of all, however, that we will never be able to listen fully and completely; we know that God's ways are above our ways. This is why the emphasis on keeping Scripture at the centre of our prayer exercise is so important. Although we will likely have disagreements at times about how to interpret Scripture, we can be grateful for God's provision of the written Word to measure the accuracy of God's spoken word as we hear it.

Scripture plays a key role in the model of not only testing but also steering the process. In the case of the EFC experience, what we heard in our Scripture-focused prayer practice often affirmed and/or revealed the next step in our discernment process. It follows, then, that the selection of which Scripture passages would act as the focal points of the weekly group *lectio* discipline was a critical part of the process. Interestingly, it was

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<sup>37</sup> Stephen M. R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust* (Simon & Schuster, New York: 2006), 20.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

in this area that skepticism was voiced most clearly. Much of this was conveyed orally; the comment from the sixth survey, quoted in Chapter Two above, about the potential for manipulation in text-choosing sums up this concern well.

In the EFC's case, the "text-chooser" during the prayer/planning process was most often the process facilitator (the author of this paper), although there were occasions when others proposed a verse as well. In hindsight, it would have been helpful for the facilitator to have explained more often how certain texts surfaced at the right time in the right place, and thus seemed to be evidence of God's provision. While some weight was placed on the integrity of the facilitator, greater transparency in communication would have been helpful.

Transparency is also important in the context of listening to ourselves. We need to be honest with ourselves about what we are hearing individually, questioning our own integrity and motivation at times. And, in relation to others, we need to openly test what we are hearing others say, especially in relation to God's revelation in Scripture. Finally, in terms of our missional context, we need to raise to the surface those key elements in our various environments through which God may be speaking.

Ultimately we need to trust that what we are hearing - whether it is through Scripture and prayer, our own reflections, the words of others or our internal and external environments - is from God. Transparency in communication, especially among the members of a missional community that is seeking communal discernment, is something we can work toward, but without the movement of the Spirit of God the best communications methods in the world will still fall flat.

We come back then to the importance of listening for God's voice. Ensuring that our ears are attuned to listen for God's voice becomes an urgent matter of both personal and corporate responsibility: each person in the missional community is responsible for staying attentive and sifting through the noise to hear accurately, and at the same time, the community needs to be one that encourages listening together.

### ***Improving the experimental communal discernment model***

Taking together the lessons learned through the EFC experimentation and the comparison with other models, the communal discernment model that was developed by the EFC staff could be strengthened in several key areas.

1. *Group size and roles*: While Gordon Smith's model suggests that a larger group will likely not be able to participate directly in a communal discernment process, the EFC experience suggests that this is indeed possible. Nonetheless, we would do well to clarify the roles that are played by the members of the group: while all are invited to participating in listening and to speak out of that listening, the process of sifting through all of the input to find patterns and meaning in all of that input will likely be a leadership task. The results of the sifting should, however, be clearly communicated to, and tested with, all members of the group.
2. *Individual discernment*: Pierre Wolff's model indicates a need to emphasize the importance of individual discernment alongside communal discernment. The challenge is to develop effective ways of encouraging individual prayer disciplines and integrating the two streams of discernment.

3. *Environmental scanning*: The models developed by Danny Morris and Charles Olsen, and also by Guy Saffold, contain important elements that could be included in the integrated prayer/planning model. Saffold, in particular, offers valuable environmental scanning tools that would assist a missional community in the “Discovery” stage of communal discernment.
4. *Appreciating and inquiring at the same time*: Applications of the communal discernment model should take into consideration the need to build on those areas where God has already been blessing the organization. It would be helpful to incorporate more of the “appreciation” element of the Appreciative Inquiry approach than the EFC staff did, without undermining the importance of inquiring into both the positive and negative elements in the community’s environment.
5. *Evaluation and trust*: The evaluation stage of the communal discernment process needs more emphasis. Here we will need the willingness to go beneath the surface to address issues of trust as they arise. Also, trust in the outcomes of the communal discernment effort needs to be based on the trust that through the process we have heard God’s voice as accurately as is humanly possible.

### ***Next Steps***

Further use of the communal discernment model developed by the EFC staff will very likely produce new insights into further improvements that are needed; research into other communal discernment experiences will also be fruitful for testing and improving our use of the model.

The traditional Ignatian and Quaker practices of communal discernment, for instance, offer resources for further development; anecdotal evidence also suggests that other missional communities, besides the EFC, are experimenting with their own communal discernment models. If the interest in communal discernment is indeed a move of the Holy Spirit in the Church today, then more and more of these models will crop up. Comparing the different models - recognizing that the reasons for their variations must be respected and the tendency to streamline them into one preferred model avoided - will constitute our next step in researching communal discernment and developing models for it.

Another area of research that went beyond the scope of this current exercise would be in relation to emerging models for leadership, organizational development, team-building and partnership formation, and to the increasing emphasis on the spiritual disciplines. While the use of the EFC model for communal discernment appears to particularly appropriate to “missional” and “emergent” communities, an examination of this premise would be another valuable next step.

A final next step to be listed here would be the application of the EFC model in other contexts. How well would it work in congregational settings, for instance, and could it be used in ministry and missional agencies that have a very different focus from the EFC?

Whether it is by way of the EFC model or another model altogether, the key thing is to recognize and proclaim the importance of two key elements that the EFC model uncovers. First is our critical need to listen for God’s voice so that we can know that God is indeed in our midst, leading us through changing times. Without such assurance, commitment to any missional effort will die off, and the effort will fail.

The second key element is the need to include all members of the community in the listening process. While the leadership role in the communal discernment process remains a crucial one, leaders in most environments can no longer take unto themselves alone the authority that comes with hearing God's voice, expecting all others in the community to respect that authority. While it may have existed in the past, trust in this kind of leadership approach has been eroded - in the Church in North America, at least - to such a degree that more inclusive approaches to listening must be adopted in order to ensure effective means of answering God's call to participate in God's mission.

### **Conclusion**

Efforts to listen for God's voice have little merit in relation to missional purposes if such listening is seen as an end in itself. A hymn, "Lord, We Hear Your Word with Gladness," in the *Common Praise* hymnbook of the Anglican Church in Canada sums up beautifully the bigger picture in which listening takes place and thus performs the role of bringing closure to this paper:

Lord, we hear your word with gladness: you have spoken - we rejoice:  
words of love and life and freedom - help us make their truth our choice!  
Now in holy celebration for your Word we worship you;  
spoken, written, known in Jesus, ours today to prove anew.

May we hear with understanding, by your Spirit taught and led;  
may the springs of all our being by your living Word be fed;  
may our hearts accept with meekness all the grace your light makes known;  
may obedience mark our footsteps till we make each word our own!

You have spoken; yours the fullness, ours the wealth of this your Word:  
debtors, then as living letters, we must make our gospel heard!  
By your Spirit's power transform us; shed your saving light abroad  
till our lives by love in action show our world the truth of God!<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Margaret Clarkson, "Lord, We Hear Your Word with Gladness," in *Common Praise* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1998), Hymn No. 447.

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