MEMO

DATE: April 18, 2017
TO: Participating Board Members & CEOs
FROM: Terry Stokesbary
RE: Cohort 4: Pre-Reading Resources for May 3-4, 2017

Attached is “Option #2: Spiritual Discernment Articles” for your pre-reading insights prior to the second session of the Board Leadership & Development Program.

4 Resources for the Board of Directors

YOUR SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT PROCESS

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Let’s be clear here…there are no “7 Easy Steps to Spiritually Discern God’s Voice.” So, this is just a resource to, maybe, point you, your board, and your team in a direction that would be helpful.

Maybe…you might even shred this document…get on your knees…and then report back on what God said to you! The following pages, however, have some resources—that may be helpful. Attached:

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INTRODUCTION...and a taste of what’s ahead!

The Power of a Whisper

Hearing God. Having the Guts to Respond.

by Bill Hybels

Hybels, knowing that theologians on the right and the left question whether God still speaks to us mortals today—and if so, how?—suggests five questions to ask to discern God’s whispers. They are:

1) Is the prompting truly from God?
2) Is it scriptural?
3) Is it wise?
4) Is it in tune with your own character?
5) What do the people you most trust think about it?

See John Pearson’s book review on pages 9-10.

NOTES:
4 RESOURCES FOR YOUR BOARD AND TEAM:

YOUR SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT PROCESS

Instructions:
Simply put: Invite God into your planning process!

Step 1: Appoint a “spiritual discernment team” and ask them to hear from God about ways your entire team can discern God’s direction.

Step 2: As you establish a spiritual process for discerning where God is leading your organization, be sure to read Barton’s chapter on the planning process in this extraordinary book. (If you have time, take your board or team through the entire book. It could be ministry changing!)

Insights on Discernment from
Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry
by Ruth Haley Barton (foreword by Leighton Ford)

Read John Pearson’s review:

- “God’s will is the best thing that could happen to us under any circumstances.” (Danny Morris and Charles Olsen, Discerning God’s Will Together)

- “At the heart of spiritual leadership and spiritual journeying is discernment—the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and the activity of God both personally and in community. The Israelite journey is really a story of ongoing discernment.”

- “The spiritual leader is distinguished by his or her commitment and ability to guide the discernment process so the community can affirm a shared sense of God’s desire for them and move forward on that basis. The practice of leadership discernment, like any other Christian discipline, is a means of creating space for God’s activity in our lives.”

- “Romans 12:2 indicates that the ability to discern the will of God is a natural byproduct of spiritual transformation in community.”

- “The impulse to discern—to know and do the will of God—is a spiritual dynamic that goes against human willfulness. When individuals, leadership groups or congregations have a desire to become more discerning, this in itself is evidence of God at work.”
“Even when we think we know what the question is, there may be a larger question lurking underneath the rest, a question that holds even greater significance for us. The question about a new building project might deepen into a question about mission and values and whether a new building might not help us stay true to these. What starts out as a meeting to set strategy gives way to the deeper question of whether we are pushing our own agenda or whether God is really opening up new opportunities. What begins as a question about event scheduling raises a more far-reaching question about pace of life and whether we are living together in such a way that we honor true human limitations and create space in our lives for loving God and others. Thus discernment begins with clarifying the question and perhaps even listening for the deeper question.”

“It is also important to involve the right people. One very common leadership mistake is to think that we can take a group of undiscerning individuals and expect them to show up in a leadership setting and all of a sudden become discerning!”

[On Considering Options] “The Quakers, who are known for their discernment practices, would encourage folks to ‘place each path near the heart’ and see which one brings consolation or desolation.

- On which options does the Spirit of God seem to rest?
- What is the fruit of each option?
- Is there a Scripture that God brings to mind that is pertinent to the issue we are facing?
- What is the thing that God is making natural and easy?
- What brings a sense of lightness and peace even in the midst of challenge?
- Is there an option that enables us to do something before we do everything?”

“In an unpublished source, a Quaker pastor put it like this: ‘Unity is the fundamental marker that God’s direction has been discerned.’”

“But discernment is not the endgame. The endgame is to actually do the will of God as we have come to understand it. Now is the time to bring in the strategic planners and the consultants, if you need them. Now is the time to move forward with confidence that ‘the one who calls you is faithful and he will do this.’ (I Thessalonians 5:24 NIV)”

“With all this book’s emphasis on the soul of leadership, you may have been wondering how you get somewhere! Well, you get somewhere by discerning God’s will and doing it together. That is what spiritual community and spiritual leadership is all about.”
Review by John Pearson:
http://urgentink.typepad.com/my_weblog/2012/07/index.html

From Decision-making to Discernment

Warning! This is a dangerous book (I’ll explain). And it’s certainly a no-brainer Top-10 book for 2012 for pastors, ministry leaders and board members. It might even be my No. 1 Book-of-the-Year pick, but the year’s not over yet.

Ruth Haley Barton has the audacity to write, “Just because something is strategic does not necessarily mean it is God’s will for us right now.”

She says that our staff meetings and board meetings must move from decision-making to discernment. “Spiritual discernment is the ability to distinguish between good (that which is of God and draws us closer to God) and evil (that which is not of God and draws us away from God).”

She adds, “Many of us have been taught that leadership is having the answer, and we come into meetings we are leading prepared to bestow that wisdom on our trusty followers; we might ask God for wisdom in a prayer that sounds very spiritual, but the truth is, there isn’t much room for God to do or say anything other than what we already have in mind.”

Spiritual leadership has a different flavor believes the author and founder of the Transforming Center. “There are many qualities that contribute to good leadership, but it is our commitment to discerning and doing the will of God through the help of the Holy Spirit that distinguishes spiritual leadership from other kinds of leadership.”

And there’s the problem: most of us want to do the will of God, but few of us are willing to invest the time to learn, practice and facilitate a spiritual discernment process. (Raise your hand if your board has a designated “discernmentarian.” How about a wise sage? Barton says you need both.)

About 75 pages into this dangerous book, I grieved the wasted years of clever PowerPoints, flipchart busy-work, 31-tab binders and too many frequent flier miles…just soldiering on…when, in fact, I was focused on the wrong thing. To think that, instead, we could have actually heard from Almighty God Himself!

Ruth Haley Barton got my attention in 2009 with her extraordinary book, Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership, especially the chapters on spiritual discernment. Then several clients
mentored me with stunning moments of discernment. The blinders fell off. I began to see God’s work with new eyes. You will too, if you do the hard work of reading, reflecting and praying through this book—but don’t do it alone.

Each chapter begins with Barton’s keeping-it-real continuing story of Grace Church, a fictitious megachurch in the Pacific Northwest. Grace has vision, passion, a gifted top-notch team “and they wore cool jeans.” Trust me—she’s been in our churches, sniffed around, and knows way too much!

Dangerous? Have you every gathered your team or board for a fork-in-the-road decision and prayed for “holy indifference” (a good thing)? She writes, “At the beginning of any leadership discernment process, it is good to be reminded to ask for the grace to be indifferent to matters of ego, prestige, organizational politics, personal opinion, personal advantage or even ownership of a pet project. We ask God for the grace to desire his will—nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.”

“If we do not reach the point of indifference, or if we are not at least honest about the fact that we are not indifferent, the discernment process becomes little more than a rigged election.”

Dangerous? How about instead of feeble attempts at conflict resolution, you practice conflict transformation—and, says Barton—it’s a prerequisite to the discernment process.

Dangerous? “Have you ever been part of a meeting in which people were so tired that they made a decision just so they could go home? Have you ever participated in a decision-making process knowing that you were resorting to ‘sloppy desperation’ just because you were exhausted?”

You’ll appreciate the been there/done that elephant-in-the-room stories—and how a spiritual discernment process can lead you to a healthy culture. Barton will inspire you—and give you tools—for the priority task of discerning your team’s values. Her ten guidelines for “entering into and maintaining a listening posture” are both brilliant and practical. You’ll want to laminate the list and bring it to every meeting. (Hey, Hank! Read No. 3 again! “DO NOT INTERRUPT!”)

Dangerous? Barton warns us about attempting spiritual discernment when there are no spiritually discerning people in the room. So she plows deep into that field with practical exercises for preparing the ground. (The harvest takes time.)

But the point of all this is not more visionary leadership, better decisions, S.M.A.R.T. goals, bigger budgets or fewer staff or board conflicts. “The main point of discerning the will of God is to do it.” And then she encourages us with I Thess. 5:24, “…the one who has called you will be faithful to bring it to pass.”

I just bought 30 copies.
Spiritual Discernment: Emerging from a Burning or Burned Out Heart? - http://leadershiptransformations.org/
Stephen A. Macchia, Founder and President, Leadership Transformations, Inc.
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When I met with Pastor Greg he was inquiring about how to engage his leadership team in a new season of discernment about the future of their local church. Ministry Executive Mike came to see us about how best to lead a strategic planning process with his non-profit board and ministry staff. Christian businesswoman Sherry came for one on one spiritual direction about how to prayerfully anticipate her next phase of professional growth and acumen.

Each of these leaders is at a crossroads seeking guidance for the individual leader, the team, or his or her ministry. The presenting issue is usually about how to make a significant decision which will positively impact their lives. They are looking for a process which will lead to a solution. They generally want help discovering the quickest route from confusion to clarity.

However, there is something more important than the directions we suggest, and that’s diagnosing what’s going on underneath the hood. The GPS won’t get you anywhere if your engine’s not working right. As they lean into whatever form of discernment that’s in front of them, there is one more important element to consider: the heart. Yes, the heart of the discernment process is the heart of the person(s) involved in spiritual discernment. This important reality is often overlooked or assumed by many leaders today.

Spiritual discernment begins with a growing attentiveness to God’s loving invitation to come close, draw near, and receive his grace-filled embrace. This is discernment of his presence, power, and peace. Out of this awareness we discover God’s divine intention for us to follow fervently after his will. This is discernment of his purpose and priorities for our individual lives and our shared expression of his love for the world around us. Not necessarily linear, but certainly a “both/and” discovery process – spiritual discernment includes both invitation and intention.

In Luke 24, when Jesus came alongside the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, they didn’t immediately recognize his presence (vs. 16). He asked them a few simple questions and they responded as if he were the only one on planet earth that was unaware of what had just taken place (vs. 19-24). But, as he walked with them, shared with them from the Word and joined them at the table, they recognized his presence. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” (vs. 32).

After this encounter, they got up, returned to Jerusalem, found the eleven, and proclaimed the truth of Jesus’ resurrected presence (vs. 33-35). Their experience of his presence, power and peace was the starting point of discernment for the disciples. It’s the same starting point for us today.

The burning heart is attentive to the presence of God. A burning heart is passionate about developing a vital relationship with the Lord, and desirous of deepening intimacy with Christ every single day. A burning heart is listening for the still small voice of the Spirit and knows that God has more important things to say to us than we do to Him. A burning heart is a discerning heart.

Today, however, instead of burning hearts, we often encounter burned out hearts. Most of our
lives are supersaturated with words, activities, relationships and responsibilities. We have believed for a long time “I’d rather burn out than rust out” so we rationalize our busy, productive lives. As a result, we neglect our hearts and live in a world of assumption or negligence about its true condition.

If our heart isn’t burned out, it could be broken. Or bruised. Betrayed. Or besieged. Either way, if our heart isn’t aflame with the love of Christ it’s most likely a hardened heart, worn thin, easily cynical or arrogant. There are a lot of these hearts in the Christian community today. Most likely they’re sitting across the board table from you. Or, quite possibly, these words reflect the state of your own heart.

Where your heart is, there will be your discernment also. This is a truism I’ve seen over and over again. In all of the groups we’ve serviced as facilitators of a custom-designed discernment process, we’ve seen hearts that are all over the map, from burned out to burning and everything in between. No matter who joins you at the discernment table, they bring with them their hearts. Their hearts need attention. No one is exempt. The condition of their hearts directly impact the discernment process.

A burning heart is one that is growing in attentiveness to God’s presence, power, and peace. Out of that place of attentiveness, such a heart is developing an awareness of God’s call to fulfill his purposes and priorities. When this first happens in one’s prayer closet, it more naturally occurs in the context of a group discernment process with others of like-heart and mind.

Therefore, what happens in the quietness of personal spiritual growth needs to be our top discernment priority – for ourselves and for our teams.

How do we develop a burning heart for God? Well, first of all, we need to press the pause button on our overstuffed lives, hop off the treadmill of constant motion, shut down the constant barrage of technology, and simply say no to noise and activity. And, having done so, find a spacious place to meet with the Living God who longs for our attention.

In our prayer closet we practice paying closer attention to the still small voice of God. It’s here where we open the Scriptures and receive the living Word. Here we enjoy prayerful fellowship with the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Here we sit reflectively and ponder deeply the meaning of our lives and our heart’s true desire to live for Christ.

If we are to engage in meaningful spiritual discernment with others, and listen well for his will for our shared ministry life, we first need to tend to the state of our own hearts. What’s your choice – a burning or burned out heart? What you choose for yourself will impact those around you as well.

“While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you’ (Luke 24:36). May the presence, power, and peace of Christ be our reality too as we enter our prayer closet for personal discernment. From that perspective, the process of engaging in spiritual discernment with others will flow toward a clearer understanding of God’s purposes and priorities.

The Power of a Whisper

Issue No. 204 of Your Weekly Staff Meeting highlights Bill Hybels’ new book on having the guts to hear God speak. He notes how God’s whispers have impacted his board meetings, his parenting and much more. And this reminder, check out my Management Buckets website with dozens of resources and downloadable worksheets for your staff meetings.

Plugged Ears to God

Pipe down, everyone. The gems in this quiet book are…well…disquieting. First of all, how many book titles combine “guts” and “God” these days? (Actually, there a few.) But this title hooks you; the inside stuff convicts you.

Wherever Bill Hybels (pastor of Willow Creek Community Church) speaks—the room goes quiet. In his latest book, he’s suggesting that when God speaks (often with a whisper), you should go quiet.

The trademark transparency that is Bill Hybels is alive and well. Example: at the end of a Willow Creek elders meeting, “in typical fashion the chairman of our board led us in a quick assessment of our demeanor and participation that evening. He asked, ‘Does anybody need to make amends for anything, clarify a point or apologize for a wrongdoing of any kind?’”

Hybels raised his hand—and his credibility—by confessing a playful, but inappropriate comment made earlier to a new elder. The elder was not offended and knew Bill was joking.

Yet this from Hybels: “I got a subtle flag in my spirit after I made that wisecrack,” he admitted, “so I want to stick with the apology and ask your forgiveness here tonight.”

That’s just one of dozens of gems that eloquently illustrate the book’s title, The Power of a Whisper: Hearing God. Having the Guts to Respond.

Hybels, knowing that theologians on the right and the left question whether God still speaks to us mortals today—and if so, how?—suggests five questions to ask to discern God’s whispers. They are: “1) Is the prompting truly from God? 2) Is it scriptural? 3) Is it wise? 4) Is it in tune with your own character? And 5) What do the people you most trust think about it?”

I’ve tried to tune up my wisdom radar lately as I work with colleagues to address the unique nature of Christ-centered board governance. So I was arrested by this thought on God’s written whispers:

“At the start of an Elders’ meeting recently, one of Willow’s Elders began his prayer this way: ‘God, may we have your mind on the matters we’re about to discuss.’”
That’s not an unusual prayer. What’s unusual (my opinion) is seeing a board, or a management team, or a family, or any group of Christ-followers who pray the prayer—and then can connect the dots to actually discern God’s voice and answer. Referencing James 1:5 (“If any of you lacks wisdom...”), Hybels comments, “The challenge isn’t whether or not he will send it [wisdom], but whether or not we will hear and heed it.”

So how do we hear God’s whispers? This book rolls it out, one practical example after another, after another—comforting examples even—almost like the quiet but confident waves lapping a lakeshore. The chapter titles lure you in: God’s Written Whispers. Light for Dark Nights of the Soul. Promptings for Parenthood. The parenthood pages are amazingly practical and laugh-out-loud (quietly) funny.

Read with open palms and open heart, this book could do serious damage to your status quo. Hybels warns, “There is no more critical goal in life than to keep a pliable heart before God. God cannot be seen by spiritual eyes that are shut. God cannot be heard by spiritual ears that are plugged. And God cannot be followed by a heart that stubbornly stays hard.”

Read at your own risk.

**Your Weekly Staff Meeting Questions:**

1) Hybels says that God’s whispers often are directed to someone else. “If you find yourself with the opportunity to speak into a situation that demands wisdom, but the wise path is not obvious to you, consider King Solomon’s counsel, found in Proverbs 17:28: ‘even fools are thought wise if they keep silent, and discerning if they hold their tongues.’ Perhaps God intends to communicate his wisdom through the lips of another, and your role in this situation is to listen.” **How hard is it for you to remain silent sometimes?**

2) Bill Hybels memorized Scripture in his youth and discovered how God’s whispers spoke to him through those Scriptures, even as a second grader. In the appendix, he lists 35 favorite verses under 13 topics. **Share one of your favorite verses and perhaps how God whispered that verse to you recently—and why.**