

Shared Wisdom

An effective style of leadership



When people gather for circle or congregational meetings, do participants have occasional (or not so occasional) differences of opinion about how to organize a project or accomplish a task? Are there times when tempers flare?

More than 20 years ago, Mary Benet McKinney, OSB, wrote *Sharing Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision Making* for church councils struggling with the same problems. She adapted an early Christian tradition (the discernment process) to meet the needs and demands of the time.

McKinney wrote that “as we come together” as Christians, “the Spirit, in order to share with us the wisdom of God, promises to each of us a *piece* of the wisdom.” She said:

- No one has all the wisdom.
- Everyone has a different piece.
- Everyone has some of the wisdom.

And sharing that wisdom is how good decisions can be made.

Is it possible that your group could learn this way of making decisions, using the process in your own gatherings? One thing that will come from it is a deepening of the group's prayer life. Prayer will no longer be an afterthought.

This process of sharing wisdom is not new, but it may be unfamiliar to you or your group. Keep in mind that this kind of decision-making takes time and cannot be rushed. Once your group gets the hang of it, you can use it over and over again.

Three things are needed in this process: prayer (lots of it), the involvement of those affected by the potential decision, and reliance on the Holy Spirit. The mutual respect and sharing of wisdom that are integral parts of this process are benefits that will serve your group well into the future.

How to use this resource

This resource offers a way to address issues that trouble a group, a way to move in a new direction and to meet the needs of all who are affected by the group's decisions. Meetings for this discernment and decision-making process should be led by a skilled facilitator; she need not be an officer of the group. A second person could develop a prayer experience for each gathering. A third person will be needed to record the discussion and provide copies to all participants before subsequent meetings. Newsprint and markers will be helpful.

This process is not a source of quick answers. It takes time to learn from one another, discern a direction, and then implement what will work. If at some point your plans don't seem to be working, feel free to go back to sharing wisdom. And always, to prayer.

The process

1. **Prepare.** Contemplate and pray, alone and together. Focus your and the group's contemplation on God—God's will and actions. Think of prayer as communication with God, opening the lines between us and God.
2. **Identify** the idea, problem, situation, or challenge that needs to be discussed.
3. **Gather** information. Ask who will be affected by this decision. Those who will be affected have the right to share their wisdom with the group *before* any decision is made. Distribute the information to the group.
4. **Reflect.** Each member of the group reflects on the information in relation to the challenge or problem; this reflection must include individual prayer. It is important to schedule enough time between distributing the information and the actual meeting when wisdom is to be shared. Reflection time can be days or weeks.
5. **Share** wisdom. In this meeting, *each person* shares, that is, both speaks *and* listens. Remember the three points above: No one has all the wisdom; everyone has a different piece of the wisdom; everyone has some of the wisdom.
6. **Discern.** Discernment is the awareness that the Holy Spirit is acting within us as we gather and take on the task. Pray that the Holy Spirit is at work in the community. Discernment includes consideration of possible actions and choices.
7. **Repeat** steps as needed. Sometimes sharing of wisdom must be repeated before discernment.

The goal is to come to a decision with which every participant is able to live gracefully. The key to this goal is the willingness of each person to accept the results. This takes a great deal of humility, a willingness to struggle with oneself and others, and, most important, a willingness to grow.

Applying the process: An example

Here is an example of how this process can be used to address the perennial problem of women's groups: How do we involve younger women?

Prepare.

Invite those who are not currently part of the group to take part in the process. In this case, they would be younger women.

When you ask women who have not previously participated, invite each one personally to join the gathering. A general invitation may not be effective.

Pray in preparation for each meeting and open each meeting with prayer. Invite the Holy Spirit into the group.

Sharing Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision Making (Mary Benet McKinney, OSB; Tabor Publishing, Valencia, Calif., 1987) is no longer in print. It may be available through sellers of used books (including www.amazon.com), or you might check for a copy in your church or synod library or that of a neighboring Roman Catholic parish. It would be helpful to be able to read the book, but the process outlined in this resource is enough to get you started in a new leadership style.

Identify the challenge.

In the first meeting, the group might ponder questions like these.

Why do we want to include younger women?

- To give younger women the support that older participants had on their own faith journeys?
- To do what older participants want to have done?
- To carry on something that older participants started?
- To come up with and carry out new ideas?
- To learn and celebrate the gifts of each person?

What do we mean by “younger women”?

- Do we mean younger women who work full-time?
- Younger women who have recently retired?
- Younger women with small children?
- Younger women in college?
- All of the above?
- Some of the above?

Why do you or would you participate in this group?

It's important that those who are not currently participating describe what they hope the organization would provide or become. It's also important that those who are currently participating describe the benefits of participation. What are the needs of each that, if met, would make it easier to participate?

What are the obstacles to participation?

Obstacles will be named by both those who are and those who are not currently participating in the group. Listen closely. Obstacles might include such things as meeting times, for example. If younger women work during the day, meetings might be scheduled for evenings or weekends. Or maybe someone would be willing to help younger women start a group of their own that fits under the Women of the ELCA umbrella. That volunteer would make certain that this group is represented in organization-wide decision-making.

Gather information.

This could start at the first meeting with brainstorming. Remember to ask all who will be affected by this decision to take part. The recorder could later mail or e-mail her notes to all, including participants who were not able to attend.

Reflect.

Pray over the information gathered and the decisions to be made. Take some time for reflection before the second meeting.

Share wisdom.

At the second meeting, sharing wisdom takes place. Each person shares and each person listens. If after multiple rounds of sharing and listening, only one person is still holding a specific position, it may be time for her to let go of it and seek to listen more attentively to the wisdom of the group.

Discern.

Discernment demands openness to God, freedom to let go, and willingness to go in whatever direction God calls. Once you've discerned a direction, plan to carry it out involving all who have a stake in the decision.

In our example, the wisdom of the group might lead to taking on a specific project on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon, under the leadership of a group that includes current participants and younger women who have not been involved before.

Now try this in your group. There are no quick and easy answers—it takes time to learn from one another and then implement what will work. If it seems that your group's chosen action doesn't quite work the way you thought it would, that gives you new information that you can use in the next round of sharing wisdom.

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