

Midlife Decisions: In Search of Resources for Personal Discernment

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Abstract

This article explores the issue of discernment through tracing the author's experience wrestling with personal midlife decisions. The article begins by describing my sense of turmoil and enquires whether Baptist resources are available to support the decision-making process. 'Communal discernment' in its traditional form is examined but dismissed as ill-suited to my task, while the Baptist principle of 'soul competency' seems to offer a viable starting point. Similarly, searching the Scriptures offers insights but fails to resolve my dilemmas, although engagement with Catholic spirituality through the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius proves fruitful. I go on to consider whether small group discernment within Baptist settings might provide an effective blend of intimacy and community, discussing both a home-grown experiment and a published case study. In reporting the outcomes of the process, namely attaining a sense of peace despite continuing uncertainty, I conclude that discernment is deep spiritual work that cannot be rushed.

Keywords

Decision-making; discernment; guidance; spirituality

Introduction

This is a personal story; yet I am increasingly persuaded that all I can offer the church, ultimately, is my own personhood, created, redeemed, shepherded, and sustained by God. In Christ 'all things hold together', including the fragments of my unfolding narrative and the community of Christ-followers whose interwoven narratives form a longer epic.¹

In the summer of 2020, I was granted a three-month sabbatical, which took place during lockdown. Travel was impossible, but there was ample time for reading and reflection at home. My focus was 'the

¹ Col 1:17. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

spiritual journey of midlife'. This life season may be characterised by 'concerns about getting older, self-questioning, a period of maladjustment, and a reappraisal of life'.² Successfully navigated, this stage can lead to 'ego integrity' and a 'satisfactory life review'.³

The midlife journey is inevitable but deeply personal; it requires humans to throw off external expectations and travel inward in search of authenticity. Richard Rohr expresses the invitation to midlife thus:

So get ready for some new freedom, some dangerous permission, some hope from nowhere, some unexpected happiness, some stumbling stones, some radical grace, and some new and pressing responsibility for yourself and our suffering world.⁴

I have continued to ponder these themes, hoping to pursue a more integrated approach to life in my fifties and beyond.

Personal Decisions

Two important questions formed during my midlife reflections: one vocational, the other personal; each requiring a response. The first question concerned the future of my ministry. After ten years in the same post, I had become conscious of dwindling energy levels but also a sense of restlessness. James Hollis identifies a correlation between energy deficit and vocational misdirection:

When the path we are on is right for our souls, the energy is there. When what we are doing is wrong for us, we can temporarily mobilize energy in service to goals, and often we must, but in time such forced mobilization leads to irritability, anger, burnout, and symptoms of all kinds.⁵

² Margie E. Lachman and Rosanna M. Bertrand, 'Personality and the Self in Midlife', in *Handbook of Midlife Development*, ed. by Margie E. Lachman (Chichester: John Wiley, 2001), pp. 279–309 (p. 303).

³ Jutta Heckhausen, 'Adaptation and Resilience in Midlife', in *Handbook of Midlife Development*, ed. by Lachman, pp. 345–394 (p. 350).

⁴ Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (London: SPCK, 2012), p. xii.

⁵ James Hollis, *Living an Examined Life: Wisdom for the Second Half of the Journey* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2018), p. 23.

It seemed natural to explore whether God might be calling me to a new chapter, or whether I should remain and embed myself further into my existing community.

The second, more personal question was this: should I take a DNA test? Upon the death of my father nine years ago, I had learned of the existence of at least one and probably multiple half-siblings. Some children were the product of short-term relationships, but he had also volunteered as a sperm donor in the days before such processes were fully regulated. For someone raised as an only child, this was a huge revelation. DNA testing offered the possibility of connecting to my father's other children, but would this be wise? There was a risk of emotional fallout for all concerned.

These questions began to occupy a good deal of my attention. There was a sense of urgency, a felt need for resolution. Unexpected bereavements confronted me with my own mortality: there was limited time remaining in which to forge or renew family connections, achieve new goals, or leave a meaningful legacy. It seemed essential to pray about these matters — but how? I needed to discern God's voice. Brittany Krebs, reflecting on the church's role in validating an individual sense of call to ordained ministry, writes,

It calls for spiritual discernment that can be uncertain and risky. Our lives are flooded with voices competing for our attention, making it difficult to identify the voice of the Spirit if we are not perceptive.⁶

I lacked confidence in my own perceptiveness but was wary of involving others. Did my Baptist tradition have any resources to offer? Or was I required to make such momentous decisions in complete isolation? Any conclusions I came to would have implications not just for me personally but also for my ministry to church members navigating their own life journeys.

⁶ Brittany Stillwell Krebs, 'A Word from a Seminarian', *Review and Expositor*, 110 (Fall 2013), 551–553, (p.552).

Communal Discernment

The Baptist practice of communal discernment has been widely discussed. It is held up as the gold standard for decision-making within the Christ-centred community. For Paul Fiddes, this is fundamentally a question of authority:

[...] authority finally lies with the rule of the risen Jesus Christ, who is present in the local congregation [...] There is no chain of command, no pyramid of power. Christ alone rules, and the task of the local church gathered in covenant community together is to find the mind of Christ. It must find his purpose for it as it comes together in church meeting.⁷

James McClendon elucidates how the congregation submits to Christ's authority through this process of communal discernment, which is,

a communal undertaking in which God's people in a certain place meet and consider their next steps in the common life, bringing their shared journey under mutual study in the light of all the Scripture and all experience, committing it to ultimate authority in earnest prayer, and shaping the common judgement of all concerned.⁸

Stuart Blythe defines communal discernment succinctly as 'the practice of local congregations, intentionally gathering, to try and work out together what they believe the living Jesus Christ is saying to them concerning their life, ministry, and mission'.⁹ This practice is underpinned by the Baptist Union of Scotland's 'Declaration of Principle':

That the Lord Jesus Christ our God and Saviour is the sole and absolute Authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the

⁷ Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), pp. 85–86.

⁸ James Wm. McClendon, Jr, *Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Volume 2* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 479, cited in Doug Heidebrecht, 'James Wm. McClendon Jr.'s Practice of Communal Discernment and Conflicting Convictions among Mennonite Brethren', *Baptistic Theologies*, 7, no. 1 (2015), 45–68, (p. 57).

⁹ Stuart Blythe, 'Communal Discernment: A Scottish Baptist Perspective' <https://www.academia.edu/29883889/Communal_Discernment_from_a_Scottish_Baptist_Perspective_Article_docx> [accessed 29 October 2023] (p.74). English original of an article translated into Dutch by T. Visser and D. Visser and published as, 'Als gemeente samen Gods wil onderscheiden: een Schots-Baptistisch perspectief', in *Samen ontdekken! De uitdaging van de vergader(en)de gemeente: Samen de wil van Christus onderscheiden*, ed. by Ingeborg Janssen-te Loo (Amsterdam: Unie van Baptistengemeenten in Nederland, 2016).

Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws.¹⁰

Church meetings and vision days are typical examples of gathering for discernment and decision-making, perhaps within the context of worship or a shared meal. Such gatherings may be more or less formal, lively, tense, or inspiring; they may be eagerly anticipated as high points of church life, or secretly dreaded as flashpoints; but they are central to the Baptist way of being church.

Communal discernment rests upon or complements the Baptist concept of ‘soul competency’, whereby every believer relates directly to Christ, without the need for intermediaries. Soul competency was articulated as a Baptist principle by Edgar Young Mullins more than a century ago.¹¹ David Buschart further elucidates the principle:

People experience redemption as a result of God applying his truth directly to the heart and mind of individual persons. Thus redeemed and under the lordship of Christ, the believer is to be free to interpret the Bible apart from binding prescriptions of a creed, and apart from the demands of church or state.¹²

He characterises this position as ‘freedom for immediacy’.¹³

I was familiar with the theory of communal discernment and had experienced fruitful as well as fretful church meetings. Yet my own questions and decisions felt very personal and individual. I did not consider them appropriate or relevant material to bring to a church meeting. My genetic heritage, frankly, did not seem to be anyone else’s business! In the case of a potential change of vocational direction, the custom has been for ministers to do their soul-searching in private, lest they unsettle the congregation, perhaps unnecessarily, if in fact no change transpires. I was content at this stage to proceed alone, a

¹⁰ ‘Who We Are’, Baptist Union of Scotland, 2022 <<https://scottishbaptist.com/about-us/who-we-are/>> [accessed 5 May 2023].

¹¹ E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia, PA: Griffith & Rowland Press, 1908).

¹² W. David Buschart, *Exploring Protestant Traditions: An Invitation to Theological Hospitality* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), p. 169.

¹³ Buschart, *Exploring Protestant Traditions*, p. 169.

‘competent soul’ embracing the gift of immediacy by seeking personal direction from God.

Searching the Scriptures

Could Scripture assist in my private decision-making? The Bible seemed to be my major resource, alongside prayer, which felt more nebulous, although I hoped these two spiritual resources would complement each other. I opened the written word to hear the voice of God, confident that this word is ‘living and active’.¹⁴

Concerning guidance and vocation, Scripture abounds in examples of individuals hearing and responding (or failing to respond) to the call of God on their lives. I resonated with Jeremiah’s sense of inadequacy and Moses’s preference that the Lord ‘send someone else’ in his place.¹⁵ I had previously spent considerable time reflecting on Jonah’s disobedience and the temptation to abandon the call of God and run away in the opposite direction.¹⁶ I was familiar with the traditional selection of texts offering comfort while advocating trust, usually in the form of greetings cards or online memes.¹⁷ None of these Scriptures told me what I should do next.

Scripture repeatedly stresses that God’s people should consult with God, individually and severally, when there are decisions to be made. Saul is judged for turning to mediums instead of consulting God.¹⁸ Idols cannot speak or give guidance.¹⁹ Yet God communicates in a bewildering variety of ways. There are instances of people hearing God’s audible voice, being visited by angels, experiencing dreams and visions that require interpretation, hearing God speak through human messengers, or receiving compelling impressions that seem to come

¹⁴ Heb 4:12.

¹⁵ Jer 1:6; Exod 4:13.

¹⁶ I had been challenged by Peterson’s reflections on pastoral ministry and the book of Jonah. Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992).

¹⁷ Popular examples include Prov 3:5–6; Ps 32:8; Ps 37:4; Jer 29:11.

¹⁸ 1 Chr 10:13–14. Saul has violated the instruction in Lev 19:31.

¹⁹ Hab 2:19.

from God.²⁰ Sometimes people disagree sharply over a decision, as with the dispute between Paul and Barnabas regarding John Mark.²¹ Sometimes they pray over their options and cast lots, as in the appointment of Matthias to replace Judas.²² Simply reading the biblical accounts of others' quests for guidance, however fascinating and inspiring, would not be likely to deliver a definitive answer to my vocational questions.

Regarding DNA testing, I did not consider there to be any fundamental conflict between Scripture and the study of genetics. As Francis Collins states, 'The God of the Bible is also the God of the genome. He can be worshipped in the cathedral or the laboratory.'²³ I was clear both that I was the biological product of my parents, grandparents, and other ancestors, but that I could still recognise and worship God as Creator, the One who spoke all life into being. I experienced joy and wonder as I meditated on Psalm 139:

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

*My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.²⁴*

Genetics formed part of that 'weaving' process. I reflected that God had woven or knit the strands of my DNA together in a complex and beautiful process. God had also made it possible for humans to develop sufficient understanding, skill, and technology to be able to extract and analyse these strands. I was satisfied that I had sufficient

²⁰ A helpful analysis of guidance in Scripture is provided in Kenneth Berding, 'A Biblical Spectrum of Guidance from God (From Clearest to Least Clear)' <<https://www.biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2022/a-biblical-spectrum-of-guidance-from-god-from-clearest-to-least-clear>> [accessed 28 May 2023].

²¹ Acts 15:37–39.

²² Acts 1:26.

²³ Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2007), cited in Kelli Swan, 'Genetic Testing and the Christian Faith: Navigating the Tension Responsibly', BioLogos <<https://biologos.org/articles/genetic-testing-and-the-christian-faith-navigating-the-tension-responsibly>> [accessed 26 May 2023].

²⁴ Ps 139:13–15.

control over the permissions on the testing site: my data would be as protected as I could reasonably hope.

My hesitation related more to the psychological aspects of the process and its potential outcomes. My ultimate sense of identity was secure: I had been chosen, adopted, and redeemed by God.²⁵ I had been ‘included in Christ’ since the day I first responded to the ‘message of truth’ in 1986.²⁶ Nothing could separate me from the love of God in Christ, neither scientists at their benches nor skeletons in the family closet.²⁷

While connection to Christ takes precedence over family relationships,²⁸ those relationships are not discarded as altogether irrelevant. The many genealogies included in the Bible suggest that family history was as important to God’s people then as now. Jesus’s own family line tells more than one important story, affirming his Jewishness through his maternal line; his kingship through his adoptive paternal line; and God’s trajectory of hope through the inclusion of those who were outsiders, like Rahab and Ruth.

Scripture emphasises the importance of truth while maintaining a healthy awareness of mystery. The gospel brings revelation and illumination:

For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.²⁹

It had been a surprise to discover I had half-siblings, and their discovery of my existence could likewise be a complete shock. I had a duty of care towards them and should proceed with caution and compassion. Only those seeking their biological matches would be able to discover my existence. I felt strongly that people had a right to know who their parents were, should they wish to find out. It lay within my power to disclose what I knew of my father with any of his other biological

²⁵ Eph 1:4–8.

²⁶ Eph 1:13.

²⁷ Rom 8:39.

²⁸ For example, Luke 14:26.

²⁹ Mark 4:22, NIV.

children, if they were seeking such information. I could potentially offer them a measure of resolution, connection, or closure.

Scripture records several instances of emotional reunions with long-lost family, notably that of Joseph with his brothers.³⁰ If Christ-followers have been given ‘the ministry of reconciliation’, then reaching out to relatives seems a legitimate action, an appropriate overflow of the love God lavishes upon humans.³¹

The Bible offered clues, hints, relatable narratives, challenge, and encouragement; yet it was clear that Bible study alone would not help me to resolve my specific issues. I would need to draw on multiple resources. God’s promise through Isaiah suggests that divine guidance unfolds dynamically while the guidance seeker is already in motion:

Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it’.³²

I hoped to hear God’s voice with similar clarity and specificity.

Ignatian Inspiration

Eugene Peterson, reflecting on Jonah’s prayer from inside the belly of the fish, advocates ‘learning a form of prayer that is adequate to the complexity of our lives’.³³ While wrestling with my dilemmas, I was approached by a spiritual director, a member of my church, who offered to lead me through the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius. She sensed that I might find them relevant and helpful. The exercises plus supplementary material unfolded over a period of eighteen months.

Ignatius has been called ‘the champion of the discernment of spirits’.³⁴ The act of discernment is performed by an individual, allowing God to communicate directly to their heart and mind. This seemed to resonate with the Baptist principles of ‘soul competency’ and

³⁰ Gen 45:1–11.

³¹ 2 Cor 5:18.

³² Isa 30:21.

³³ Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, p. 101.

³⁴ Kees Waaijman, ‘Discernment and Biblical Spirituality: An Overview and Evaluation of Recent Research’, *Acta Theologica*, Supplement, 17 (2013), 1–12, (p. 2).

‘immediacy’. Mark Thibodeaux clarifies how discernment of spirits relates to personal decision-making:

The Ignatian method of discernment teaches you how to fine-tune your spiritual senses so that you can more readily detect and move toward the voice of the Good Shepherd, distinguishing that voice from all others.³⁵

In Ignatian thought, the ‘false spirit’ is ‘anything that draws me away from God and from God’s loving plan for the world’.³⁶ Conversely, the ‘true spirit’ incorporates the Holy Spirit plus anything else that draws me closer to God. When a person is in ‘desolation’, they are under the influence of the false spirit: they feel empty of faith, hope, and love; restless, apathetic, fearful, and secretive. In ‘consolation’, they are under the true spirit’s influence: they experience a sense of God’s closeness; faith, hope, and love; peace, noble desires, and transparency.³⁷

Ignatius begins from the premise that humans are created to ‘praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord’.³⁸ The whole of life, including choices and decisions, should be directed towards this end. He advocates the cultivation of a holy ‘indifference’:

[...] it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things in all that is allowed to the choice of our free will and is not prohibited to it; so that, on our part, we want not health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, honour rather than dishonour, long rather than short life, and so in all the rest; desiring and choosing only what is most conducive for us to the end for which we are created.³⁹

I had not yet attained this state of indifference, particularly regarding my vocational question. I was in emotional turmoil, veering now towards one option, now another, confused and paralysed. I recognised that I was having trouble getting in touch with my deepest desires. I felt uncertain, perhaps wary of a tussle between God’s will and my own inclinations. I was in a state of desolation, when Ignatius counsels ‘never

³⁵ Mark E. Thibodeaux, *God’s Voice Within: The Ignatian Way to Discover God’s Will* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2010), p. 7.

³⁶ Thibodeaux, *God’s Voice Within*, p. 12.

³⁷ Thibodeaux, *God’s Voice Within*, pp. 16, 44.

³⁸ *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. by Father Elder Mullan (New York: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 1914) <<https://www.catholicspiritualdirection.org/spiritualexercises.pdf>> [accessed 31 May 2023], p. 23.

³⁹ *The Spiritual Exercises*, p. 23.

to make a change', because we 'cannot take a course to decide rightly' when under the influence of the false spirit.⁴⁰

A preliminary exercise was to read Psalm 91 and reflect on my own fears — particularly an underlying fear of dying with regrets, which intensified the pressure I was putting on my life decisions. I was to picture Jesus coming towards me and let the encounter unfold in its own way.

I picture myself walking through marshland. The ground feels increasingly boggy, but I can't go back the way I've come. The water rises higher and higher up my wellies until it threatens to pour into them. Concern escalates to anxiety as I feel more stuck and perceive the reality of the threat. I sense that it is important to move slowly and not to panic. I want to be free — to come out on the other side intact.

[...]

Jesus comes towards me. He comes by a peculiar route. He knows where the dry, firm, secure footholds are. He sees my predicament and nods gently, acknowledging what's happening. I want him to rescue me, hoist me out of my boots and carry me away, but he doesn't do that. Instead, he gestures for me to watch closely and follow in his footsteps as we pick our way across.⁴¹

I was moved by this prayer experience and had new confidence in Jesus as the Way Maker, who saw my 'stuck-ness' and offered patient, committed guidance rather than an instant solution.

Many exercises involved the use of imaginative contemplation: meditating on gospel passages, imagining myself into the scene and then allowing that scene to develop as the Holy Spirit gave inspiration. Sometimes I was encouraged to imagine the gospel scene taking place in a different time and place altogether. I found this difficult at first, but as I became more accustomed to the practice, I relaxed, and found it both fascinating and fruitful. There was a liberty in not being constrained by the accuracy of historical or linguistic details. This was dynamic prayer: I felt I was encountering the living Christ and hearing God speak directly into my life. I was surprised by themes and motifs that emerged, such as a playfulness in Jesus, constantly disarming me

⁴⁰ *The Spiritual Exercises*, p. 74.

⁴¹ Author's personal journal, 16 January 2022.

and inviting me to live and work with greater freedom, courage, and lightness.

Gradually, my emotional turmoil settled. Life, ministry, and decision-making still felt hard at times, like straining at the oars of a rowing boat and not getting very far; but I began to appreciate that Jesus was rowing alongside me, and I was grateful for his companionship. I began to experience longer periods of consolation as I treasured my prayer encounters and drew spiritual strength from them. I was now in a healthier place to consider decision-making.

David Runcorn recounts the story of Macarius, a founding father of the Egyptian Coptic church. Macarius believed that God was telling him to build a monastery but was uncertain of the precise location God had in mind. He wandered through the wilderness, praying for a sign from God, but receiving nothing. Then the revelation comes:

At last, after another day filled with fervent prayers for guidance, an angel appeared with a message from God: ‘The Lord is not going to show you where to build the monastery. He wants you to choose the place. If he tells you where to build and things go wrong, you will only blame him. So you must choose’.⁴²

Even for the saints of old, guidance was hard-won: divine revelation working in partnership with internal, often painful, revolution. Runcorn asserts that ‘responsible and creative choice-making has become a lost vocation of our times’.⁴³ Ignatian practice offers a spiritual pathway towards choosing well, in God’s time and under God’s guidance. I have more to learn about Ignatian spirituality, and, significantly, have experienced it only at an individual level, not in a community context.

Adventures in Small Group Discernment

As I sought to make sense of these disparate influences, I wondered whether there might be a way to reconcile the Baptist emphasis on

⁴² David Runcorn, *Choice, Desire and the Will of God – What More Do You Want?* (London: SPCK, 2003), p. 55.

⁴³ Runcorn, *Choice, Desire and the Will of God*, p. 69.

communal discernment with the deep inner work of Ignatius. Perhaps the answer lies in small-scale communal discernment. A group of trusted friends might offer to walk through a decision-making journey together. This close circle could ensure confidentiality and allow sufficient intimacy but would still be able to offer a variety of perspectives and lift the burden of isolation. Such a group would not serve as intermediaries, or counsellors, but as listening companions and conversation partners.

Case Study 1: Jim

I recalled a previous experience of participation in another's discernment journey. In 2018, a member of our weekly house group approached the rest of the group with a personal request. Jim⁴⁴ was entering a season of change, with the potential for new opportunities. He was of retirement age, conscious of his limitations, but eager for fresh challenges. He did not want to spend all his time on the golf course, but desired to be fruitful. He had been involved in various roles, deploying his professional skills and spiritual gifts, but was questioning whether to lay these roles down. He was seeking direction and a fresh sense of God's specific call on his life. In his own words,

Exploring the options for retirement and seeking God's design in this had become an issue as I wanted to be realistic about my faculties and energies as I aged. Counselling and counselling training require cognitive acuity and emotional/empathy resources that can decline and exhaust (often slowly) to the point of ineffectiveness/incompetence. I had seen this happen and wanted to navigate these waters wisely.

Seeking wisdom — particularly in regard to major life choices — normally has been a rather private affair for me, with imposed events often featuring significantly (for example, being made redundant). My personality and spirituality are such that I have rarely had lone personal revelations as the prime impetus towards life/discipleship choices. Rather I find that the melding of my will to that of God's takes time and the idea of 'process' fits well.⁴⁵

Jim asked whether we would be willing to accompany him in a shared discernment process. I agreed to serve as facilitator and suggested using the ten-step framework outlined by Danny Morris and

⁴⁴ Name changed.

⁴⁵ Email to the author, 22 May 2023. Shared with permission.

Charles Olsen.⁴⁶ These experienced pastors, Presbyterian and Methodist respectively, draw on a breadth of sources including Roman Catholic and Quaker practices. They introduce their discernment process by invoking the image of stones in a ‘reflection pool’.

Ten stepping stones are arranged from one side of the pool to the other. The water in which God’s yearning and will are sought provides a safe place. Each stone represents a movement in the process of discernment. Participants may step on each stone in sequence, skip over one, and even come back and revisit one or more stepping stones if they come to impasse.⁴⁷

The image of the pool sets the tone of openness, curiosity, flexibility, and freedom. The steps are not to be slavishly followed: this is not a machine for producing ‘decision sausages’. The process unfolds organically within a supportive environment. The ten steps (or stepping stones) are delineated as framing, grounding, rooting, and shedding; listening, exploring, improving; weighing, closing, and resting. Morris and Olsen sound a note of caution about the significant time commitment required:

Discernment is rightfully a patient process, and a group that rushes to judgement is apt to meet with pitfalls and obstacles. Time for discernment should be free of the threat of calendar or clock.⁴⁸

Our group was in no hurry and the process — a purposeful meander back and forth among the stepping stones — unfolded over a period of about six weeks. All participants were prayerful, engaged, and supportive throughout. Jim noted,

The 10-step process encouraged and developed an openness on my part. I greatly valued having others frame questions/clarifications and challenge assumptions and motivations. Otherwise, my deliberations would have been essentially private — and probably littered with blind spots. I felt supported throughout — no doubt, in my mind, a reflection of our being a well-formed group (essential for openness and vulnerability).⁴⁹

The ‘shedding’ phase required humility and vulnerability, not just from Jim but from the whole group: the process was redundant if

⁴⁶ Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church*, rev. edn (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

⁴⁷ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together*, p. 61.

⁴⁸ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together*, p. 93.

⁴⁹ Email to the author, 22 May 2023.

we were just going to project our own ambitions, hopes, and plans onto our friend. Shedding ‘lays aside ego, preconceived notions, false assumptions, biases, and predetermined conclusions so that people involved in discernment can openly consider the matter’.⁵⁰ We each had to lay aside our personal assumptions and expectations around retirement.

Jim was attentive during the process, valuing others’ insights and prayers, but taking personal responsibility for any decisions reached and acted upon. As Scriptures, ideas, and observations were shared, Jim captured these on paper, revisiting them through the week, and responding through artwork or additional prayer exercises.

The ‘work’ of the group in developing and exploring options led eventually to a more solitary step of choosing/garnering conviction. At my choosing this took the form of a silent retreat. I dwelt on each of several ways forward for half a day, painting different flowers while saying to God ‘Is this your way?’ From this — somewhat mysteriously — emerged a preference and commitment. I took this back to the group seeking their reflections.⁵¹

The group did arrive at a shared sense of a fruitful way forward for Jim, who began to take logical next steps.

On reflection, I think the group functioned as an agent of providence not unlike the external/imposed events that featured in our other life decisions. There was an element of serendipity in play, such that I did not consider other options (such as the management group of the organisation I was serving).⁵²

Events initially unfolded in a different direction. There were unexpected reactions beyond the group and significant changes in external circumstances. At first, we were tempted to question the fruits of our discernment process — perhaps our adventure had become a misadventure? Consolation turned to desolation for a time, but in due course, new options emerged, and the pathway became clear. Although our group experiment did not ‘deliver’ an outcome as we might have imagined, it enriched Jim’s ongoing discernment process, sharpened our

⁵⁰ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together*, p. 60.

⁵¹ Email to the author, 22 May 2023.

⁵² Email to the author, 22 May 2023.

attentiveness to God and led to a deeper cherishing of one another. Jim concluded,

Participation in this way was novel for me. The support was profound and doubly so when my chosen path became very rocky — another story (with elements of the demonic). In addition to seeking a way forward in my career, the process developed useful self-awareness, which prepared me for the new things God has enabled. I liked the process very much and advocate it as a good expression of Romans 12:5–8.⁵³

Jim continues to be faithful and fruitful, using his gifts in a variety of settings, and finding renewed joy and purpose.

It is curious that when I faced my own discernment crisis, I overlooked this important experience. Serendipity may have been a factor, as it was for Jim. Sitting at my desk, I can make logical and theological connections. In the heat of a psychological moment, when I was grasping for handholds, Ignatian spirituality presented itself as a lifeline. I was carried along by the intense momentum of the exercises. This probably caused a degree of tunnel vision, whereby I failed to identify alternative resources, even those I had previously encountered in theory and practice. I may have subconsciously resisted becoming vulnerable before others, the ministry role setting me uncomfortably apart. I recognise my desire to retain control; Jim's story demonstrates how even the most orderly and careful process is no guarantee of outcomes.

Case Study 2: Norman

Sometimes, decisions require to be made, but an individual is unable to make them alone. All humans pass through times of vulnerability and powerlessness, particularly at the beginning and end of life. Jesus's words to Peter linger long in the imagination:

Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.⁵⁴

Those who have the power to 'dress and lead' others, whether in a personal or professional capacity, shoulder a weighty responsibility. A

⁵³ Email to the author, 22 May 2023.

⁵⁴ John 21:18.

person's soul remains intact, for nothing can separate them from the love of God that is in Christ⁵⁵ — but physical or mental frailty may affect their 'competency' to make or communicate decisions.

Curtis Freeman movingly describes the experience of a close-knit church seeking to support seventy-nine-year-old Norman, who was terminally ill and had slipped into a persistent vegetative state. Norman had no family, but a long-time attorney friend had been appointed as Norman's guardian. This man 'possessed the legal authority but felt that he lacked the moral authority to make a substituted judgment'.⁵⁶ He sought support from his (and Norman's) church family. Freeman reflects on the uniqueness of their position:

Our relationship to one another and to Norman made a difference in the perspective from which we considered the issues of withdrawing and/or withholding treatment. We were not a group of physicians trying to determine what was the best treatment for this patient; nor were we a hospital ethics committee seeking an impartial viewpoint; nor were we a group of policy-wonks attempting to construct a fair set of guidelines to govern other cases like Norman's. We were a group of Christian friends searching for affirmations that lay at the heart of our faith and reached to the limits of our existence.⁵⁷

The church began by reflecting on the sanctity of life, 'to see the issues at stake and to discern what course to follow'.⁵⁸ They pondered the early chapters of Genesis, recognising life as both 'donation' and 'vocation'. As they reflected on Scripture, they began to reframe their discernment process:

To some it might appear that the overriding moral question was 'Should we let Norman die?' or 'Can we help Norman die well?', but for us the troublesome question became 'How can we enable Norman to live well while dying?' We could not immediately discern how (or if) we could assist Norman to answer the Creator's call to live well.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Rom 8:38–39.

⁵⁶ Curtis W. Freeman, 'What shall we do with Norman? An Experiment in Communal Discernment', *Christian Bioethics*, 2, no. 1 (1996), p. 17.

⁵⁷ Freeman, 'What shall we do with Norman?', p. 17.

⁵⁸ Freeman, 'What shall we do with Norman?', p. 18.

⁵⁹ Freeman, 'What shall we do with Norman?', p. 23.

After much reflection, discussion, and prayer, they sensed that their responsibility towards their baptised brother was ‘to be a community of care in his dying’, pledging their presence to Norman and to one another until the time of his death.⁶⁰

Further Reflections

Freeman observes a ‘proclivity toward *individualism* in decision-making’ that in his view ‘has created a society of moral strangers’.⁶¹ I have noted my own tendency towards privacy and control, a troubling dissonance between my defensive personal stance and my more open pastoral approach. Freeman challenges an individualistic understanding of ‘soul competency’ and concludes that

discernment is formed and found in the church as a confessional community. Discernment is not a matter of individual intuition; it is a process of social reflection [...] Those who stand together under the Lordship of Christ are authorized to discern through a social process *that from which they are liberated and that to which they are obligated*.⁶²

Kyle Childress warns of the perils of individualism:

If a congregation is going to live the Christ-like life, then they had better do it as a body or else they will never make it. Lone individuals trying to live faithfully cannot stand against sin, death, the powers, and the overwhelming pressure of society. Both we and our people, as individuals, are easy targets for the powers of death; they will separate us, isolate us, dis-member us, pick us off one at a time, and grind us down into the dust.⁶³

Ministers may be particularly susceptible to such isolation. Neville Callam, former general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, offers this clarification of Baptist theology:

Discerning the mind of Christ is not simply about a Christian taking the counsel that is given in the Bible and applying it directly to a particular issue of concern. One reason for this is that, in this individualistic world, discernment of the voice of Christ is best done in community with other

⁶⁰ Freeman, ‘What shall we do with Norman?’, pp. 36–37.

⁶¹ Freeman, ‘What shall we do with Norman?’, p. 24.

⁶² Freeman, ‘What shall we do with Norman?’, p. 27.

⁶³ Kyle Childress, ‘Knowing what the Stakes are: Hauerwas Questions and Baptist Answers’, *Review and Expositor*, 112, no. 1 (2015), 37–46, (p. 39).

Christians. God can speak to each of us in the privacy of our place of prayer. But we must test what we believe we are hearing against the wider sense of the believing community.⁶⁴

Callam is writing with reference to ‘moral discernment’; yet perhaps his point holds for matters of guidance generally. Sarah Boberg, writing about vocation, observes a creative tension between the personal and communal aspects of discernment:

While God’s call is often an individual experience, it has impact beyond the individual called. God’s call is a special, unique, and sacred experience between God and an individual, and while personal, it is manifested and lived out in the larger context of Christian community.⁶⁵

The individual may and must invest time and effort in private prayer and reflection, embracing the immediacy and freedom they possess to approach Christ; yet it is essential to have companionship on the journey, to consider the impact of decisions beyond the self, and to listen to the wisdom of the church.

Christ-followers need to draw on the authority of Christ through both ‘theological’ sources — Scripture, but also creeds and Baptist confessions of faith — and ‘ecclesiological’ sources, including the local church and the wider communion of saints.⁶⁶ Disciples look to a ‘robustly present God’ who interacts with them in and through everyday life with other persons, rather than operating from a ‘closed, individualistic, buffered selfhood’.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Neville Callam, ‘When the Churches Present Inconsistent Moral Teachings’, Baptist World Alliance General Secretary’s blog, 1 March 2016, cited by Steven R. Harmon, ‘Baptist Moral Discernment: Congregational Hearing and Weighing’, in *Churches and Moral Discernment, Volume 1: Learning from Traditions*, ed. by Myriam Wijlens and Vladimir Shmaliy (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), pp. 99–114 (p. 100).

⁶⁵ Sarah Boberg, ‘The Call Experiences of Baptist Women’, *American Baptist Quarterly*, 38, no. 4 (2021), 417–432, (p. 420).

⁶⁶ Harmon, ‘Baptist Moral Discernment’, p. 101.

⁶⁷ Glen Harold Stassen, *A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), p.110. Interestingly, Stassen recommends Ignatian practice to listen for God’s voice at times when the mind is relaxed and open rather than ‘buffered’ (*ibid.*, p. 122).

The Journey So Far

So, how did I resolve my personal questions? Concerning DNA testing, I reflected on the possibility for some time. I was satisfied that testing was not incompatible with my Christian faith, and felt it held more potential for good than for harm. Perhaps I had a moral obligation to share what I could about my father with any half-siblings who might be seeking such information. I considered that I was mature enough to deal with any psychological consequences and concluded that this was fundamentally a private matter for me to decide. After consulting briefly with my stepmother and aunts to ensure they had no objections, I went ahead with the test. To date, no half-siblings have come to light, but I have connected positively with some cousins and filled in some gaps in my family tree. I am at peace both with my decision and its outcomes so far.

My vocational question proved more complex. Anglican David Runcorn provides helpful insight into the process of choosing between options:

When we talk about being ‘in two minds’ over a choice or course of action we are often struggling with our own relationship between order and wildness, between safety and risk.⁶⁸

I recognised this tension or contrary motion within myself. I was torn between the desire for change and an attachment to my church; I was weary after ten years in the same post, but reluctant to let go and unclear as to any alternative. The *Spiritual Exercises* were a valuable resource, inviting me into greater awareness of Christ’s presence. They enabled me to hear words of assurance and to receive the encouragement to keep rowing forward.

Peterson asserts that ‘to live vocationally is not a once-for-all achievement’.⁶⁹ Fiddes takes a high view of ordination, describing it as ‘a moment of special encounter with the triune God in which, like baptism, there is grace to help shape heart, mind and character’.⁷⁰ Yet

⁶⁸ Runcorn, *Choice, Desire and the Will of God*, p. 33.

⁶⁹ Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, p. 156.

⁷⁰ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 101.

he too sees ordained ministry as dynamic rather than static, open to change and further steps of discernment.

Christ may cease at some stage in the minister's life to issue a call to this particular kind of ministry: the person's way of being may be about to take a radically new direction. What has been is not reversed but taken up into a new way of being. That a call is coming to an end may well be felt by the individual himself or herself, but it is also discerned by the community of the church (local and trans-local) which has tested and recognized the call in the first place. [...] [T]hose who are called to this task of discernment should be imaginative in looking for new forms that *episkope* itself may take. Given the open-endedness of a way of being, it may be that a person is being called to a new direction *within* the office.⁷¹

One option I had long considered was higher study. During my period of uncertainty, I had a chance encounter with an academic, who mentioned in passing a master's programme that combined my previous fields of study. This held immediate appeal, but I sat with the possibility for a year before taking any further action. During this period, I discussed the prospect of further study with my husband, close friends, spiritual director, my senior colleague, and with a group of ministry colleagues who had been meeting weekly on Zoom for prayer and mutual support. These people served as my community of discernment, listening deeply to me, praying with and for me, and sharing helpful counsel.

Over the summer and autumn, I undertook an Ignatian discernment process suggested by Thibodeaux.⁷² This exercise involved pondering all the options available to me and 'dreaming' myself positively into each one, to tap into my deepest God-given desires. While contemplating the scenario of combining my present pastoral post with part-time study, I wrote the following:

I dream of weaving the two together, seamlessly though not effortlessly. I remain rooted in the church and the fruits of my learning enrich my ministry. I continue to build on my foundation but also embrace new direction. I work hard, but God gives strength. I remain reasonably secure financially, and church members are supportive of my goals. My role and voice at Leven Baptist Church evolve in line with God's gifts and my renewed sense of

⁷¹ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 102.

⁷² Thibodeaux, *God's Voice Within*, pp. 151–187.

vocation. I am happier and have a greater sense of my unique contribution to the team. When the time is right, I retire, but remain active in the most fruitful areas.⁷³

Following a period of reflection and retreat, and after investigating alternative programmes, I applied to the course I had long been considering.

This autumn, I will commence my studies while continuing in my present pastoral post. I remain open to other developments, as God's will and my own desires align. Perhaps, like Jim, I will need to recruit a new community of discernment for the next chapter; or perhaps, like Norman, matters will be taken out of my hands. The future remains unknown and unknowable. Discernment is difficult and cannot be rushed; there are no quick fixes. This is deep spiritual work. God is growing the fruit of patience in my life — fruit that I hope to share as I support others through the changing seasons of their own lives.

⁷³ Author's personal journal, August 2022.

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