

Chapter 3

The case of the church council

Getting started

The new council president said she would serve on one condition: that the council dwell in the Word of God for the first 20 minutes of each council meeting, staying in one passage all year: Luke 10:1-12, a missional story of pairs of followers being sent to people whom Jesus himself intends to visit.

The pastor did not object to this practice, and the council mostly did not object, although reaction to the idea was mixed. Some folks loved this way of beginning a meeting and felt as though the activity focused them for the work the council was called to do. Others stiffened, and some even rolled their eyes. When would the real meeting actually start? When would the council get to the business at hand? One member, after the second meeting that began in dwelling in the Word, asked the president in front of the rest of the council exactly when the meetings would actually begin, since he was preferred to attend for the decision-making.

Of course, Step One in the practice was to read the passage aloud. Step Two was to wrestle together in the group over the question “What is God up to in this passage for us? Here? Now?” As it was read, they thought about what God was up to in their church and in their town.

The first few times it was a little clunky. Who knew what God was up to, after all? The council members noticed a lot of things: pairs going out to places unknown, carrying nothing extra, extending the peace to the house they entered, looking for persons of peace there, being utterly dependent on their hosts, then eating, curing, proclaiming with them. And what was that curse at the end? That was hard to make sense of.

Sure enough, something came up

Early into that year’s meetings (the second or third one), the council received visitors. A pair of people came, they themselves in some distress, but hoping for hospitality. They told the group their situation, of looking for a new

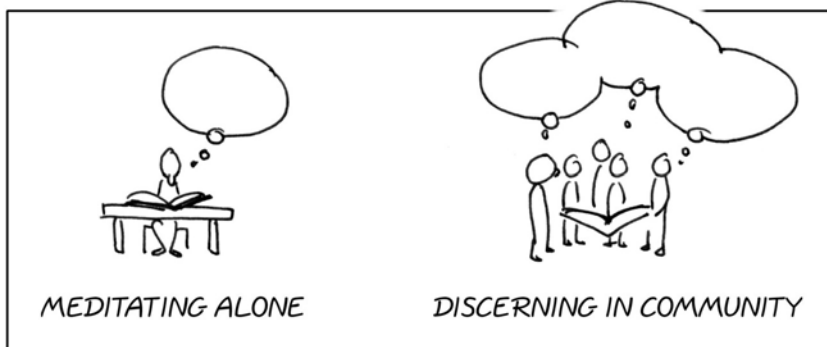
church home for a preschool, and the council heard their story calmly and with interest, giving them safe haven to think about next steps. Then in pairs the council got to work studying the responses it could make.

A chance to reflect

The next month when the council read Luke 10, it was clear to many of them that Luke's story was true for *them*. A pair had come to *them*, extending the peace. They had returned it, and relationships were being formed as a result. A new church preschool was coming into being.

But there was more. The peace that the council had extended to the school also was extended to the neighboring congregation who had lost the school, and they returned the peace in a service of reconciliation. Some curing of the sick was happening, and many on the council recognized that they were in a story, and their story was part of God's story.

This is what comes of dwelling in the Word. Really living inside a story over time begins to shape a group's collective imagination. Dwelling is done in

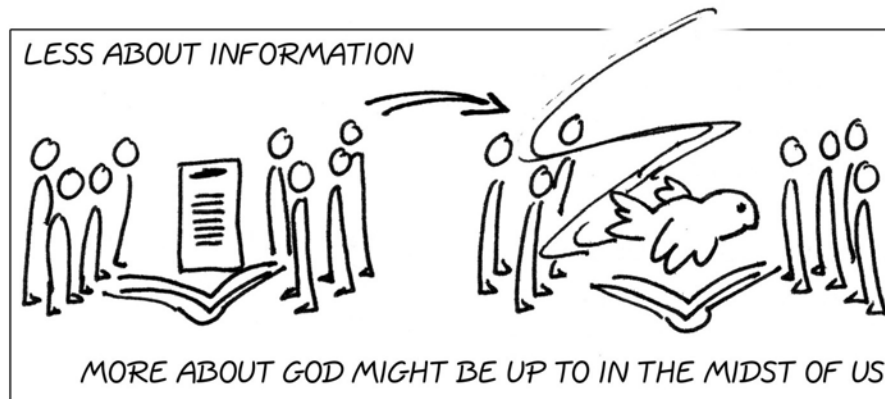


a group. That's what makes it so powerful. You yourself can dwell alone, of course. It's called meditating on the Word, and it's a process of extended prayer.

But dwelling in the Word is done in community. And this council was learning from each other how God was speaking, sending, coaxing, even puzzling each member.

Adopting this practice of dwelling may have been hard for those council members with a lot of Bible study experience. Folks who participate in Bible study are intrigued by the Word but often waiting for the teacher to interpret

it for them, or offer several readings of a particular sentence. They may be looking for the historical references that would explain this image or that saying. But dwelling in the Word involves very little of this information. Dwelling is less about learning information, as important as that is, and more about learning one another and what God might be up to in the midst of us.



Dwelling was surely hard for those who were uncomfortable with silent reflection. The members who raised objections early on were pretty sure that was not why they had been elected to the council. They were there to converse, study, make decisions, and get on with the life of the church. They surely had no objections to the Word. They just didn't want to participate in dwelling in it every time. Yet continuing this practice in this text for a full year enlarged the council members' Christian imagination, and many of them began to recognize things that were happening to the church as things that were happening in the life of God.

Dwelling led to discerning mission

Congregations are blessed by God for a reason. There is something about God's mission in each town that each church is called to do. Just as each Christian has a vocation, a call to participate in life as a gifted child of God, so too, each congregation has a missional vocation. The trick is figuring out what that calling is. How better to listen for it, to deliberate upon it, than by beginning in the Word?

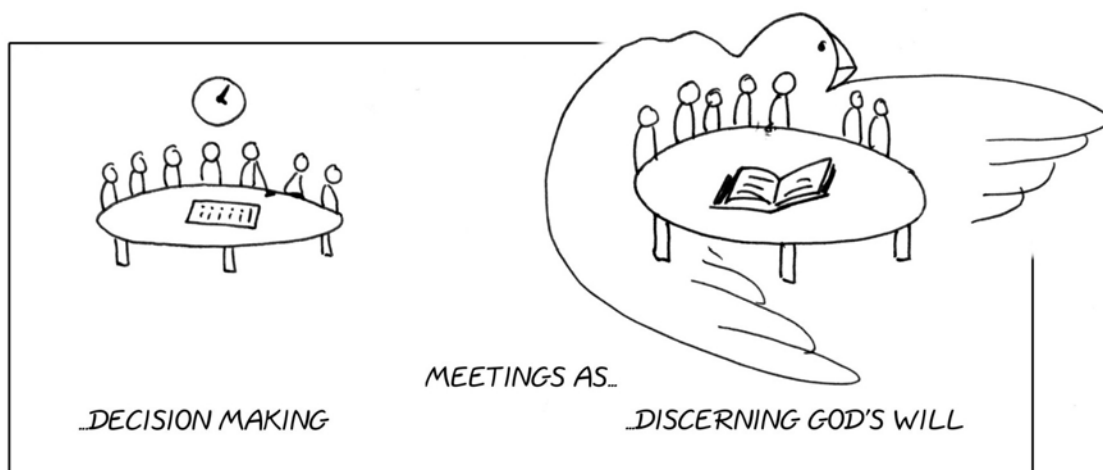
Churches do many things well. And they have hundreds of creative ideas about things they should be doing. But there comes a time to really discern

spiritually what God is up to among the congregation and what Jesus means to send a church to do, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Most of the congregations we know are very good at a few things, but they feel they must be better at more. They take an inventory or read the latest church renewal asset list and realize that they do only a couple of those things really well. Like most people, the leaders of the congregation want to be good at many things, so that they can serve many types of people.

When God our Creator gives gifts and capacities to people, those are real blessings, meant to bless the person and the many lives that person touches. How rare it is for someone to have musical gifts, writing gifts, athletic gifts, and also public speaking gifts. Of course now and then we meet someone extraordinary who seems to have it all. But mostly, because of the combination of genetics, family background, upbringing, and educational opportunity, most of us get to really develop only a few gifts or capacities. Yet they bring tremendous joy and fulfillment to us and to those we serve.

The same might be said of a congregation. At any one moment in time, a congregation is made up of people who together hold a particular constellation of gifts and capacities. Whatever the congregation does well, it enjoys tremendously. Whatever the congregation does well, the Spirit has a missional vocation for. Whatever the congregation has been blessed with the Spirit tries to turn outward in service to someone who does not yet know Jesus and who desperately needs to.



A church council, a visioning team, a worship committee, and education task force in a local church can dwell in the Word, listen to one another and to the congregation and to God speaking in scripture, and try to answer the question, “What is God up to among us? What piece of God’s action are we being fitted for now?” When they discern what God is calling them to do with their particular constellation of gifts and capacities at this exact moment, and when they take up that work, they know they are participating in the very life of God.

