

Conference of American Benedictine Prioresses Upon this Tradition, V With a Listening Heart

A Statement on the Rule of Discernment in the Lives of American Benedictine Women
Cullman, Alabama, February 5, 1996
C 2001

Listen! To whom shall we listen? Amma Scholastica. A woman with a listening heart.

I must tell you how the venerable Father Benedict once wished for something but could not obtain it.

His sister, Scholastica, had from her infancy been dedicated to the Lord almighty. She used to come to see the man of God once a year. He would come down to her with some disciples. They devoted the whole day to the praises of God and to holy conversation. As the shades of night were falling, they ate their meal together. They were still eating and it was getting late as they continued their holy talk when his sister, the holy nun, put this request to him: 'I entreat you, do not leave me tonight so that we may talk on till morning about the joys of the heavenly life.' 'My sister,' he replied, 'what are you saying? It is completely impossible for me to remain outside my cell.'

At the time, the sky was so serene that not a cloud was to be seen. When she heard her brother refuse her, the nun placed her hands on the table with fingers intertwined and rested her head on her hands to pray to the Lord almighty. When she raised it up again, such violent thunder and lightning and such a downpour of rain broke out that neither the venerable Benedict nor the brothers who were with him could put a foot outside the door of the place where they were sitting. For the nun, while laying her head on her hands, had spilt streams of tears on the table, and this was how she changed the serenity of the sky to rain. Nor did the inundation begin a little after her prayer, but the prayer and the downpour were so closely related that she raised her head from the table along with the thunder and it was at one and the same moment that she raised her head and the rain fell.

Then the man of God, amid the lightning, thunder and immense downpour of rain, seeing that he could not return to the monastery, began to complain sadly: "May God

almighty pardon you, sister! What have you done?” “See,” she replied, “I asked you and you wouldn’t listen to me. I asked my Lord and he listened. Go now, if you can. Leave me and go back to the monastery.” But he had to stay under that roof. He was not willing to remain freely in the place, so he had to stay unwillingly. And so it happened that they passed the whole night in vigil, and each fully satisfied the other with holy talk on the spiritual life.

It was of this incident that I said that he wanted something but could not prevail. For if we consider the thought of the holy man, evidently he would have like the good weather he had while going down to have continued but, contrary to his wishes and by the power of almighty God, he found a miracle coming from a woman’s heart. Nor is it any surprise that the woman who wished to see her brother for a longer time was on this occasion stronger than he, for according to the words of John, ‘God is love,’ and by an altogether fair judgment, she was able to do more because she loved more.¹

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INTRODUCTION

This document is about living in a discerning manner in the dailiness of monastic life. Tracing the historical perspectives of discernment in Scripture, the early church tradition, and the early monastic traditions as they bear upon the Rule, it delineates the rich background within which the wisdom theology of the Rule is grounded and is a response to a call to recover some meanings that may have been lost to us in history.

Jesus is a model for us of personal discernment. Doing God’s will or following the guidance of the Spirit summarizes Jesus’ own life and is the substance of what he proposes to his disciples. Wisdom is the summit of all discernment in the Christian Scriptures. Discernment of spirits is one of the gifts (1 Cor 12:10) God bestows on different individuals for the sake of the common good. Wisdom in the Christian Scriptures is both an attitude and an experience. The willingness to do God’s will as reached and understood through prayerful discernment, come what may, manifests itself in complete dedication to God. The experience which flows from an attitude of dedication to God is one of peace, which only God can give. Doing God’s will means

accepting God's kingdom into our hearts and lives, which is manifested in justice, peace and joy, all gifts of the Spirit.

The phrase *discernment of spirits* has appeared, disappeared and reappeared throughout the history of Christian spirituality. In 1 Cor 12:1-11, Paul makes three points concerning the variety of gifts: 1) they have a single source, "the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God who inspires them all in everyone," 2) "their end is the common good," and 3) their cause is "inspiration."²

Early church writers outside the monastic tradition reveal several ways that Paul's phrase was understood. In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, John Chrysostom speaks of discernment as the gift by which a Christian can identify the kind of spirit speaking through true or false prophets and whether or not a person is spiritual. Theodoret of Cyrillus associated soothsaying with demons and interpreted discernment as a gift which enabled the recipient to recognize these spirits. Origen recognized the presence of a good spirit by its leaving the mind calm and the will free.

For Athanasius, discernment was essentially concerned with the various kinds of evil spirits, their distinguishing characteristics, and the proper remedy against each. This was the common understanding among the Greek writers and represented a shift in focus away from discernment as a gift, to the distinguishing of passions. It was closely associated with the practice of asceticism. In this tradition, discernment became the name of a virtue or even a skill.

It is also evident that early monastic traditions valued personal discernment. Cassian considered discernment as a virtue which could not be acquired by human effort, but was solely a gift from God, even of the most outstanding gifts of the Holy Spirit. He believed that discernment leads the enduring monk to God and was the summit of perfection without which the monk's struggle was in vain. With Saint Antony, Cassian taught that discernment was "the mother, guardian and the guide of all virtues."³

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WISDOM IN THE HEART: PERSONAL DISCERNMENT

In the story of Scholastica and Benedict presented at the beginning of this document, we recognize the first movement of the Spirit in discernment: growth toward understanding in one's own heart. Both Scholastica and Benedict understand their own needs. They both need the regular meeting for mutual support in their search for God. At this particular moment in her own life, Scholastica, perhaps aware of her impending death, knows her need to spend a longer time in conversation with her brother. Benedict understands his own need to live by the discipline of the Rule. Scholastica also understands her power. From her daily experience of prayer, she knows the strength of her prayer. She is in touch with her power and does not hesitate to ask the impossible.

Discernment, which is integral to Benedictine spirituality, begins with the encounter with God in one's personal center.⁴ From this personal center we listen long enough and carefully enough to hear the voice calling to us: "Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?" (RB Prol 15).

In the Benedictine charism there are four elements which nourish and support personal discernment and lead to wisdom of heart: silence/solitude; *lectio*; prayer, especially the daily Liturgy of the Hours; and stability in the monastic life.

Silence

Silence, with the solitude which supports it, is the first element in cultivating a discerning way of life. Benedict regards silence as so important "that permission to speak should seldom be granted even to mature disciples, no matter how good or holy or constructive their talk" (RB 6:3). Silence is essential in order to listen. "Listen" is the first word of instruction given in the Rule.

We listen in order to hear the voice of God (RB Prol 9). God calls out: "Silence the warring voices within. Be still and know that I am God (Ps 46:10)." Our silence flows from fear of the Lord (first step of humility), wonder that the mighty God chooses to speak to us out of love. We wait in silence, aware that the voice of God might be heard only in the "sound of sheer silence" (1 Kgs 19:12).

We are called to an active silence, preparing us both to listen and to respond. Jesus is our model. After his baptism, Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the desert to be alone with the voice that had spoken, "You are my beloved Son." Throughout his life he left the crowds and went off to a deserted place to be silent and pray (Luke 4:42;

5:16;6:12 for example). As he prepares for death, he withdraws from the disciples to commune with his Father (Luke 22:39-45). Benedict calls us to listen (RB Prol 1), to dialogue with God (RB Prol 16, 24), and to translate what we hear into action (RB Prol 39).

Benedict urges us to be silent also out of consideration for our sisters who are listening to the word of God. We are silent outside the oratory (RB 52:2-3), during table reading (RB 38:5), after Compline (RB 42:1-2). We are silent out of respect for the power of the word. We avoid useless talk (RB 4:52-53) in order to give attention to the word of life (RB 48:18).

Lectio

We hear the voice of God in our daily *lectio divina*. *Lectio* has its roots in the Jewish synagogue, in the meditation on the Bible practiced by the rabbis and their disciples. Origen considered *lectio* be the necessary foundation of the ascetical life as well as of contemplation. Augustine echoed this in his famous dictum that when we read, God is speaking to us, and when we pray, we speak to God. Evagrius wrote: “Reading, vigils, prayer—these are the things that lend stability to the wandering mind.” Cassian advised: “Give yourself continuously to sacred reading until continual meditation fills your heart and fashions you, so to speak, after its own likeness.”⁵

Our monastic ancestors devoted to this holy reading what may seem to us an astonishing amount of time. Both the Rule of the Master and a previous rule legislate for three hours of *lectio* each day. Benedict calls for as much as four hours daily and assumes that all of Sunday will be devoted to this activity.

Of what did this reading consist? Benedict wrote, “What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest guide for human life?” (RB 73:3). He also allowed for the reading of other holy writers whose works “resoundingly summon us along the way” (RB 73:4).

In Chapter 73, Benedict makes it clear that the aim of this immersion in the word is to help us “hasten to our heavenly home.” Monastics are to listen “willingly” to holy reading. They are to memorize much of it, so that God’s word is so ingrained in the memory it can flow out of the heart at any time. This reading is to be leisurely and

restorative, so that we come to know the Scriptures by translating them into our own experience.

Experience teaches us that fidelity to *lectio* brings to our prayer the transforming power of the word of God. It can show us multiple examples of free, personal responses to God. Slowly and imperceptibly the Word takes flesh in our own lives.

In the rush and haste of modern life, the time we devote to *lectio* can seem like luxury. Our whole monastic tradition teaches us otherwise. To read attentively and deeply is to learn discernment. It is to take time for God. Our *lectio* is our listening time. We must treasure it. “And what, dear sisters, is more delightful than this voice of the Lord calling to us?” (RB Prol 19).

Liturgy of the Hours

We hear the voice of God in our daily Liturgy of the Hours. The psalms make up the major portion of this our monastic prayer. As part of Scripture, the psalms are God’s word to us. In the context of prayer, we recognize the psalms as God’s living word, the way God speaks to us today. “If today you hear God’s voice, harden not your hearts” (Ps 95:7-8).

As Christians we pray the psalms in the name of Christ. The early church “interpreted the psalms as Christ-centered, each psalm speaking of Christ, to Christ, or Christ himself speaking to the Father in and with the Spirit” (see above *Of Time Made Holy*, 53). We hear Christ praying in some psalms. We see a foreshadowing of Christ in some psalms. Some psalms are easily addressed to Christ.

Through the psalms we hear the voice of God in human words. They teach us that God can be found in every experience of our lives. We who are privileged to pray them daily find that the psalms soak into our bones. Their rhythms pulse with our blood and their phrases spring to mind in moments of need or joy or humor. The psalms keep before us the whole believing community and, indeed, the whole world. In praying the psalms, we claim our own responsibility for the well-being of all.

Benedict understood the entire psalter as formative of our spirituality (RB 18:23). The psalms set the tone for our whole experience of the Liturgy of the Hours. Because they are words of God, we gather the whole community to listen. God’s word is most richly present when the psalms are proclaimed in the assembly. Through praying the

psalms together, we hear the word of God in the voices of our sisters. Between the psalms we are silent in order to ponder the word, to hold it in our mouth, to chew it, and to let it nourish us. The alternation of word and silence prepares us to hear God's voice in the readings and gives us courage to call upon God in intercession. Word and silence permeate us so completely that we embody our listening in ritual gestures of signing ourselves with the cross, bowing, rising, and singing.

Stability in the Community

Stability in the community, unique to the Benedictine commitment, gifts us with the elements necessary for personal discernment: the solitude and silence to listen to the word of God, time and place of *lectio*, sisters with whom to celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours. Stability enables us to find mutual support in our search for God.

Benedict warns that gyrovagues, who never settle down, are "slaves to their own wills and gross appetites" (RB 1:10-11). The strong kind of monastics, the cenobites, however, are those who "never swerve from God's instructions, but faithfully observe God's teaching in the monastery until death" (RB Prol 50). They who remain in the school of the Lord's service hear the voice of God calling daily, "Come and listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord, the root and crown of wisdom. She will give you life" (cf. RB Prol 9-13; Sir 1:18).

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WISDOM: HEART-TO-HEART RELATIONSHIPS THAT NOURISH AND TEST PERSONAL DISCERNMENT

We recognize in the story of the meeting of Benedict and Scholastica how trust and a willingness to dialogue are involved. Scholastica valued the past regularity of their meetings together. From this she trusted that God would provide the opportunity for continued conversation and that Benedict would surrender to her request. Benedict risked leaving the safety of his cell to meet his sister for heart-to-heart conversation. Now on this occasion, he again willingly entered into dialogue. The quality of their relationship was such that both drew nourishment from the fruitful exchange. Benedict's query, "What have you done?" called forth her honest response. God had heard her

heartfelt prayer. The wisdom of knowing that God hears the purity of our intention guided her desire to pray for prolonged holy conversation.

Such conversation guided by the Spirit are an engagement in an age-old monastic custom of dialogues between an elder and a disciple. Under the spiritual guidance of an amma (wise woman), the disciple experiences the love of someone who desires only one thing for the disciple: profound union with God. The amma's love enables the disciple to undergo the purifying process of bringing undetected motivations, unarticulated compulsions, and unconscious desires to the light of Christ. The amma's wisdom lies in the knowledge that the grace of God brings enlightenment; she assists as a midwife to the birthing of Christ in the disciple. The disciple's task lies in the disclosure of thoughts, concerns, and desires; that is, the humble disclosure of her life to the listening heart of another.⁶

Together they engage in the basic principle of discernment of spirits in the Gospel, distinguish the true from the false: "You will know them by their fruits" (Matt 7:20). This is applicable to people's words and behaviors, which manifest what is in their minds. The interpretation of the principle of the fruits of discernment is thus concerned with the fulfillment of the command to love. So it is that we find in Gal 5:22-23 the true fruits of the Spirit listed as: "love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness and chastity." Testing of spirits is the final concern, for not every spirit is of God (1 John 4:1-3; RB 58:2).

In writing the Rule, Benedict drew from the collective wisdom of the monastic tradition, both the semi-eremitic and cenobitic strands. He chose elements which he discerned were necessary to cenobitic living. Benedict's contribution to the scriptural and early church tradition was his emphasis that it is the Holy Spirit at work in the monastic that generates the love of God and of Christ and becomes the mark of the attainment of humility.⁷ In the Rule (RB 5:11-13), living out of the Gospel, "the narrow way," is embodied in walking by another's judgment, discretion, and wisdom. Thus the quality of discernment is ultimately tied to a key monastic virtue, obedience. Benedict also uses discernment, the presence of the Spirit, as the criterion of monastic vocation. A potential monastic vocation is indicated by eagerness for the opus Dei, for obedience and for situations generating humility (RB 58:7).⁸

The intertwined nature of obedience and humility is seen in RB, particularly in the fifth step of humility (RB 7:44-48). Here the community member acknowledges her failures openly and freely to the prioress and awaits a healing word and the mercy of Christ in turn. The prioress is not the sole channel of God's grace in this regard, for in RB 27 Benedict provides for wise and mature elders to go to a wavering sister in order to communicate consolation and to challenge her to reconciliation.

The example of the elders of the community (eighth step humility, RB 7:55), who live the monastic way of life, becomes the norm by which and the context in which each monastic is led to detect the motivations and to test the inclinations of her own heart. She is called to walk the narrow way or of obedience (RB 5:10-13): living by the judgments, discernment, and wisdom of another. She participates in this journey again and again in the many calls to conversion, as she engages in the cycles of personal and communal prayer, silence, and humble acknowledgment of self before another. The dynamic of love of the senior for the junior and the reciprocal respect of junior for senior (RB 63:10) invites monastics to engage in relationships that gradually move both amma and disciple to mutual discernment.

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SHARED WISDOM; COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT

We know a lot about storms! The years of renewal have produced much lightning and thunder and torrents of rain. As discerning women, what have we learned from our storms? Some of us were wise enough to rejoice; but most of us, like Benedict, were often upset, confused, and angry. It was not according to our plan, our vision, of how it was to go. But as we stayed with the storm, surrendered to its presence and inconvenience, we eventually found our God, not in our agenda, but in the space created by the storm.

Storms are the struggles we share as we seek to know the wisdom of the spirit, the will of God for our lives together. As we come together in the monastic chapter, the monastic council, and our various teams, committees, and commissions, we come as discerning women in touch with our own lived experience, our piece of the wisdom, and open to the God of the gathering, the wisdom of our sisters. "As they [Scholastica and

Benedict] passed the night in vigil, they each fully satisfied the other.” We, too, learn the power of listening with the ear of the heart, of disclosure in humbly sharing our personal wisdom, and of obedience to the collective wisdom of the gathering.

Humility and obedience are especially important when the whole community is together as a body, each member providing the wisdom of her opinion for the leader’s pondering, reflecting, and deciding. Benedict’s frequent repetition of these two monastic values is obviously intentional and calls us to ponder his deliberate emphasis on these two qualities in the RB as they relate to communal discernment.

Our story seems to indicate that Scholastica knew that this was her last visit with her brother. As the events of their meeting unfolded, Benedict, too, must have suspected the same reality. In doing so, he would have recognized the unique wisdom that was hers, the wise woman, wrapped in the wisdom of her years. And so it was that he listened and learned and treasured her words. We, as communities, are blessed with the wisdom of age, those among us who carry the traditions in their hearts. We must be especially open to embrace their insight, to listen to their stories, and to honor their presence among us.

We recognize that they, too, have only their own pieces of the total wisdom, as do the newly arrived with their exuberance, and the mid-life people with their wisdom, challenges of ministry and administration, and their own issues of integration.

Only as we share our experience of God with each other is discernment possible. *Lectio* can give each of us the time and space to put words to our experience, to grasp it better and to become women of wisdom for our community and our church. A profound personal level of *lectio* in a community is bound to be communicated, leading to a deeper sharing and a keener discernment of what God is asking us now. To the degree that every member of the community is able to speak her wisdom, then to let it go, and to hear and assimilate the wisdom of others, will the group come closer and closer to the will of God on any given issue at any given time in its history.

It is in the silence of the heart, then, that we are open to hear, to speak, to let go, to treasure, to surrender, and ultimately to fully satisfy each other.

Most of Benedict’s references to discernment are directed at the monastic leader. She is to seek to be prudent, considerate, insightful, temperate, able to affirm the strong

while sustaining the weak. These are qualities necessary for every member of the monastic chapter if discernment is to happen. But of special note is the importance of the listening stance the monastic leader must develop, for it is she, more perhaps than the others, who is called to humble obedience. She is to listen to all the wisdom of her sisters and, from that, seek to discern not her own will, but the will of God.

Key to communal discernment is the understanding that no one comes into the process to “win.” Scholastica did not win in the sense that Benedict lost. Benedict, indeed, was ultimately obedient to his sister, but both gained; both “won” from the night spent in holy talk on the spiritual life. The very validity of a discernment process is found in the unanimity of the acceptance of the discerned decision. One opinion does not win over another opinion. Rather, the entire community wins because the voice of the Spirit has been heard, interpreted by the wisdom of the prioress after discernment with her sisters, and accepted by all members.

Communal discernment depends upon, flows from, and is the fruit of lives lived out of a discerning stance. Communities as well as individual members will discern the voice of the Spirit in all the events of their personal and communal lives.

The practice of discernment as a way of life envisioned in the Rule indicates the subtle interplay of the monastic values of humility, obedience, wisdom, peace, good zeal, and love within the framework of seeking God in the *opus Dei*, *lectio divina*, and daily calls to listening and *conversatio* in a stability unto death in the monastery. Beyond the strict interpretation of discernment as discretion or some kind of prudent moderation, exists the fullest theology to walk the path of wisdom in total dedication to where the will of God is leading. The fruits of living this discerning way of life are expressed in a growing attitude of openness and trust, a willingness to dialogue, a recognition of one’s brokenness, an attentiveness, a willingness to stay with the discernment process and to search out God’s presence in all the events of our lives, a growing freedom to let go and move in whatever direction God calls. The teaching of Ps 34:9, “Taste and see the goodness of the Lord,” is an invitation to partake of the word of life, to savor its flavor in *lectio*, and to become wise in the ways of God.

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DISCERNMENT; THE JOURNEY INTO UNITY

We recognize in the story that Scholastica was able to do more because she loved more. Her humility allowed her to ask of God what her brother at first refused. Her desire was laid before God, her will conformed to God's will for her, her love manifested in bowed head and eyes cast down with tears, but heart reliant on God's own love of her. In her last earthly request, Scholastica bore the signs of a heart silent, humble, obedient, and wise, waiting upon the Lord "out of love for Christ, good habit and delight in virtue" (1 John 4:18, RB 7:69). How many occasions of *conversatio* were needed to produce in her such readiness to harmonize her own and God's will we shall never know. How daily and how faithfully she must have prayed in stillness, in the *opus Dei*, in *lectio*, for her to make this last request. Even in her death with her soul ascending like a dove, her brother is enabled to behold a vision of the whole world embraced by the light of Christ. She, whose name means "contemplation," awakened her brother to the "blessing" of this vision.

He, who taught the good zeal of love of Christ, most fervent love of community members, sincere and humble love of the monastic superior, learned to pursue what was better for his sister through her loving fear of God. His surrender to God's desire prepared the way for his prayer experience of her passage into everlasting life.

Scholastica and Benedict teach us fidelity to the monastic way of life; reliance on the dailiness of private prayer, *opus Dei*, and *lectio*; stability to a community of relationships; and listening in obedient surrender to God's will. The whole way of life opens us to the voice of God in the varied manifestations of that voice which calls to us: "Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?" (Ps 34:13, RB Prol 15).

Just as the whole Liturgy of the Hours transforms us and all for whom we pray into the body of Christ, so, too, does our *lectio* move us beyond a purely personal activity for the monastic to an ongoing link with the community and the church. It is a social experience out of which discernment emerges. The power of the word may have different consequences for different believers, yet by its very nature Scripture can profit all.

Lectio done seriously in our monastic communities can become a kind of unifying vision. It helps us pay attention to what God is doing in our world. In a society where attention is now a commodity reaping millions for those who can exploit it, reflective *lectio* can encourage us to perceive and work against this kind of mass dehumanization.

In every generation the word of God may say more than could have been perceived formerly. In our time we find ourselves at a unique crossroads in both church and society. The voice of the Spirit cries out to be heard in the voices of women. We look to the past, and we find a Scholastica who taught her brother Benedict to honor the Spirit above the system; a Hildegarde who suffered interdict for the doing of right; a Gertrude of Helfta who chose to serve Christ by counseling others in spiritual direction; a Julian of Norwich who proclaimed the motherhood of God; a Catherine of Siena to whom a pope listened; a Teresa of Avila who brought woman's gifts to the reform of the church; and a Dorothy Day who led the church to a new sense of justice.⁹

We, too, know the call to let our voices be heard. The fruit of discernment is the gift that we Benedictine women, with so many other discerning women throughout the world, bring to the church, that eventually all the People of God will hear wisdom from a woman's heart.

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IMPLICATIONS

1. Our monastic profession both calls us to and shapes us for lives of discernment through:
 - obedience which teaches us to listen to the word, the prioress, one another, nature, and all the events of life with openness and a willingness to be touched and formed by the Spirit;
 - stability which offers us the fidelity for the lifelong journey into total surrender to the Spirit;
 - conversion of life according to the monastic way, which challenges us to risk hearing and responding to the Spirit.
2. The primacy of silence, solitude, *lectio* and the opus Dei requires that:

- there be places and times of silence in our hearts, our lives, our communities, our ministries;
 - there be opportunities for solitude;
 - *lectio*, as a daily practice, be the norm; it must be taught, modeled, affirmed and shared;
 - the opus Dei be prayed in a discerning manner, with adequate times of silence for reflection.
3. To grow as a discerning community, we must be willing to trust ourselves to one another, to hold each other's frailties gently, and to call each other to the fullness of life. For this to happen:
- we need others who will walk the journey with us, a spiritual director or a spiritual companion.
 - we need to love and to be loved.
4. A discerning community accepts the responsibility to come together in humility, to nurture a climate in which each member can share her individual piece of the wisdom, listen attentively to the wisdom of others, and embrace the discerned decision as the will of the Spirit for the community at this time. To make this happen it is necessary that:
- all members of the chapter be given an agenda and adequate information before the meeting;
 - dysfunctional behavior, that prevents all from being heard in a respectful manner, be confronted;
 - adequate times for reflection and sharing be built into the meeting;
 - sufficient time be provided to bring the group to consensus.
5. A discerning community seeks to birth the word in new and creative ways with a global vision and a commitment to risk.

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