



**COMMUNAL  
DISCERNMENT**

**FOR PARISH  
FOSTER CARE MINISTRY**

**ARCHDIOCESE OF KANSAS CITY IN KANSAS**

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# WHAT IS COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT?

When faced with a question or issue, a faith community begins with its members' relationship with God and God's desire for the community.

Change is a constant in every life and in every community. What does not change is our God, who is with us, in us, and working through us.

Simply put, communal discernment is a consensus-building process to help individuals listen for, or discern, what it is God desires from the community of participants. The process allows time and space for silent prayer to allow the Spirit to dwell within the meeting place and guide participants. Communal discernment allows everyone's voice to be heard in a thoughtful, respectful manner.

Communal discernment is contrary to how "business meetings" are typically conducted and may be unfamiliar to many participants.

***This leader's guide is intended to give you the background information you need to facilitate communal discernment within your parish.***

Why do we have to bother to be prayerfully open to God – or at least try to do so? If we don't, we do not let God guide us. If we are predisposed to one option, genuine, prayerful discernment is impossible because we cannot be moved or inspired by the Spirit, which we believe dwells in each person. When we are already sure of ourselves, there is no gap left, and no space for God's will to manifest itself.

*St. Ignatius called this posture of openness "holy indifference."* Compared to traditional decision-making, communal discernment factors in our hope, our desire to be led by the will of God. In decision-making, we are likely to ask questions like "Which is the better option?" or "What do I want?" In discernment, the question is more likely to be, "What does God desire for us, for our children and for our parish?"

Communal discernment begins with this premise: ***We do not advocate solutions or promote options; we begin by prayerfully seeking wisdom together.*** This attitude of openness should not be mistaken for apathy or lack of interest. Rather, this is a posture of freedom. It means approaching everything with fresh eyes, confident that God is there. At its core, this prayer practice is about finding God in all things, including all our decisions.

Similar to some pastoral council discernment tools and the Catholic-centric "Called and Gifted" program, this resource is adapted from Practice of Discernment, Spiritual Formation Program of the Grace Institute, [luther.edu/graceinstitute](http://luther.edu/graceinstitute), Aug. 2013, and used with the permission of the Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops.

**COME  
HOLY SPIRIT**

# COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT LEADER'S GUIDE

*To prepare yourself to guide the discernment process, consider the following:*

- **Review the communal discernment guide and guidelines.** Become familiar with the process, get a sense of the flow, learn where the spaces are within the process for the Spirit to enter, and where participants can share and grow together. For scheduling and planning purposes, allow, at a minimum, 90 minutes for the process.

- **Familiarize yourself with the question or concern the group is seeking to discern.**

In this instance, you are considering:

*Our Archbishop is asking us to discern how to assist the 7,500 children in the State of Kansas' child welfare system. What can we do to serve these vulnerable and marginalized children, their families and those who are filling the gaps in their care as foster/ adoptive parents, social workers and other care-givers? What are our parish's specific gifts and talents that match well with their needs and dreams?*

- **Invite people to participate in the discernment process.** They should be people able to make decisions and ensure the discerned action plan will be implemented. This could be parish staff and clergy; pastoral and finance council members; ministry leaders; foster/adoptive parents; or a combination of these or others. An announcement in the bulletin could draw people who have an awareness of the foster care system and are interested in becoming involved.

- **Gather data about your parish relevant to the question.** Consider a survey about people's awareness of and involvement in the foster care system. Do some of your ministries have volunteers or material resources already available to assist in a new ministry?

- **Get to know the presentation topic.** Review the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas' Foster Care Ministry website at [www.archkcks.com/foster](http://www.archkcks.com/foster). Consider whether you should invite someone familiar with foster care to do the presentation, such as a parishioner who is a case worker or foster parent, an individual from Catholic Charities or another faith-based entity involved in the child welfare system, or someone from the Kansas Department of Children and Families. Contact DCF at <http://www.dcf.ks.gov/> to obtain current data about the needs in your county or city.

- **Understand the leader's role.** The leader or facilitator of communal discernment has two seemingly opposing tasks: To help the group make room for the Spirit to dwell with them, and to monitor the timing of the various agenda items. While these tasks may appear at odds, a skillful facilitator can help make room for the Spirit by assuring those who are more time-focused that they can let go of this awareness because the facilitator is guiding the group through the process. Let the group know you will be ending times of silence with an "Amen" or other gathering phrase, and allow a moment or two for people to be ready to interact with the group.

## PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

### LEADER PREPARATION CONTINUED

- **Understand communal discernment is not a “race to a decision.”** Consensus differs from other forms of group decision-making in that action is not determined by a motion, a second, and a vote. Rather, the group seeks to agree upon the action by including the wisdom of everyone in the group. You’ll read more about consensus within this guide.
- **If things begin to feel contentious, take a breather.** Taking a moment of silence or offering a communal prayer (the Prayer for Foster Children, the Lord’s Prayer, Hail Mary, etc.) can help center the group.
- **Consider discussing the process first.** If the group is unfamiliar with communal discernment, it may be helpful to introduce the process itself at one meeting and then use the process to discuss your approach to foster care support at a second meeting. This may help people be more open to the process and allow them to make room for the Spirit to guide them.

*COME  
HOLY SPIRIT*

#### 1. Dwell in the Word (about 10 minutes)

Prayer with the Scriptures is an ancient practice that encourages us to listen for God’s voice, to God’s response to us, and to our questions and concerns. Listeners are invited to be open and attentive to the stirrings within them.

**Suggested Scripture readings** (These are printed on the participant's guide):

“If there is any encouragement in Christ, any solace in love, any participation in the Spirit, any compassion and mercy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing. Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but [also] everyone for those of others.”  
Philippians 2:1-11

“Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” Matthew 1:20-21

- Welcome everyone. If they don’t know each other, encourage them to introduce themselves. Distribute the handout.
- Explain that the group will practice a prayerful process to help determine how the parish can support those in the foster care system. Explain that there will be a presentation and they will then be guided through the discernment process.

## PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE CONTINUED

### 2. Sharing time (about 20 minutes)

- Invite sharing about what happened in the prayer time.

*What part of the text did you spend time with?*

*How does it speak to you and your life? How did God meet you?*

### 3. Listen to the presentation and frame the question for communal discernment (about 15 minutes)

- Encourage participants to listen to the presentation with open minds and hearts, and not to “formulate rebuttals” while listening. Remind participants that if they are too busy thinking about their response, they can’t hear what’s being presented.
- Even if you select someone to do the presentation, you should also review the Archdiocese of Kansas City's Foster Care Ministry website at [www.archkcks.com/foster](http://www.archkcks.com/foster) and contact the Kansas Department of Children and Families. Contact DCF <http://www.dcf.ks.gov/> to obtain current data about the needs in your county or city.

### 4. Discern God’s desire for us and our community (time varies, but a minimum of 20 min)

- Thank the presenter and ask if there are any questions of clarification.
- Focus the group on the question:  
*There are many children in the foster care system needing our help. Their biological families are also suffering. Finally, the people who are “stepping into the gap” as foster/ adoptive parents, case workers, teachers, and others also need our support and encouragement.*  
**What can our parish do in response?**

- Begin with several minutes of prayerful silence, ending with an “Amen.” As the discussion begins, listen to the wisdom of everyone in the group. Don’t immediately lean toward one option over the other. Take a step back and detach yourself from anything that would color your decision prematurely.

- Rely on God; be open, prayerful, and confident we can seek God’s will for us and strive to achieve consensus on the question.

Check in with participants in the group; be sure all have been given the opportunity to be heard.

### 5. Determine if there is consensus (time varies)

- Share what is noticed; discuss ideas and thoughts, and determine where consensus might be emerging. Test if there is consensus; if there is no consensus, pause for five minutes of quiet reflection, repeat step 4.
- Explain that consensus is the hoped-for outcome. The goal of this prayerful process is to achieve consensus on the question. Consensus differs from other forms of group decision making in that action is not determined by a motion, a second and a vote. Rather, the group seeks to agree upon the action by including the wisdom of everyone in the group. The one who is leading a communal discernment process makes sure everyone desiring to speak has the opportunity and receives respectful attention, and helps to determine when the group is moving toward consensus.
- Anyone can ask whether the group has achieved consensus, but the leader should pay special attention to this question. Consensus does not necessarily mean everyone is in full agreement with the proposal. Rather, the question might be something like, “Is this proposal something you can live with?” People who indicate that, while they may not be in full agreement, they can live with the proposal are “standing aside” for the sake of achieving consensus. Those who feel they can’t live with the proposal can block it, acknowledging consensus has not been achieved.

### 6. Conclusion (about 5 min)

- End with a brief prayer of thanksgiving. If there is no consensus, the leader may suggest adjourning and establishing a date to continue the communal discernment process. If there is consensus, the decisions made will determine next steps.

# EVERY CHILD DESERVES A LOVING HOME

## PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

Every child deserves a loving home. That simple statement becomes profound when considering there are approximately 7,500 children in Kansas who, for various reasons, have been removed from their families and are under the guardianship of the state of Kansas. Their need for a loving home is perhaps even more urgent, especially because many of them have special needs. Their behavioral challenges, medical fragility, mental health and the trauma they have experienced requires a strong network of care to surround them. What gifts and talents are in our parish that would match well with the needs and dreams of the children in the Kansas child welfare system, their biological families and those who are caring for them?

### DWELL IN THE WORD

"If there is any encouragement in Christ, any solace in love, any participation in the Spirit, any compassion and mercy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing. Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but [also] everyone for those of others."- *Philippians 2:1-11*

"Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."- *Matthew 1:20-21*

### SHARING

*What happened in the prayer time? What part of the text did you spend time with? How does it speak to you and your life? How did God meet you?*

### FRAME THE QUESTION

*Our Archbishop is asking us to discern how to assist the 7,500 children in the State of Kansas' child welfare system. What can we do to serve these vulnerable and marginalized children, their families and those who are filling the gaps in their care as foster/adoptive parents, social workers and other care-givers? What are our parish's specific gifts and talents that match well with their needs and dreams?*

# COME HOLY SPIRIT

## DISCERN GOD'S DESIRE FOR OUR COMMUNITY

### Maintain an attitude of prayerful listening

- Don't be afraid to allow periods of silence between questions and comments
- Are you truly listening to each other?
- Look for signs of God. Pay attention to where God seems to be breaking through with love, joy, or compassion.

### Engage in thoughtful reflection on the facts

- Ask questions that are simple and non-directive
- Don't be afraid to ask questions that seem far-fetched. If they arise, they probably need to be asked.
- Gather information and ideas
- Explore practical considerations
- Evaluate the information you have
- Keep the attention on the focal questions

### Take part in prayerful deliberation

- Ask open-ended questions (rather than yes/no questions)
- Tap into the imagination and draw upon Scripture. Provide opportunity for reflective responses.
- Does everyone have the opportunity to speak?
- Wait for and ask whether there is consensus on the question