

Discerning well

In seeking to honour God, we naturally wish to discover his purposes for us both individually and corporately. As an Advisory Board, churches and pastors come to us with what is often a heightened desire to *hear well*. As we get to know churches and pastors in these times, we have the opportunity to observe practices that engender good discernment processes. This paper is a starting point regarding what it means to be *called*, the identity we have as Christians, and the practices that assist pastors to discern well. It is our desire as an Advisory Board that the following will result in the Board having greater confidence in the pastoral recommendations we make to local churches as well as assisting our pastors.

Call and ministry assignment

As an Advisory board we want our discernment process to be as effective as possible. A good discernment process builds unity, allows churches to maintain momentum and means that there are far fewer surprises for both pastors and churches. Healthy discernment can assist in building a greater Kingdom culture among the Church and reduce the grief over the leaving and arrival of church leaders.

In contrast, there are a number of things that muddy the waters in ministry discernment and can create hurt for pastoral appointments. Crucial to a good process is a healthy understanding of the difference between who we are and what we do. Unfortunately, our language of being *called* often blurs the line between the two.

The following statements are commonly heard: *"The church has issued a call".... "I felt called to the place".... "be sure of your call".... "but I'd thought I was called there".... "I don't think he/she ever was really called".... "I'm not sure of what my call is"*. In this context *called* carries a number of assumptions:

- That we've heard from God;
- That God has, through a variety of means, revealed what he wants an individual to do and where he wants them to be;
- That God has gifted a person in a particular way;
- That God has given a person a particular passion or desire to work in a certain area.

Such language carries great weight and can often blur the lines between what we do (role) and who we are (identity). When this happens, getting a *call* right can create a pressure that make a good discernment process difficult.

What are we called to?

Jesus didn't ever call people to a role but he called them to himself. He called people into relationship with himself and then from that relationship *sent* them out. Call is about relationship more than it is about ministry. We are *called* to a relationship with Christ and from the intimacy of that relationship he gives us assignments that fit who we are and how God has gifted us.

Consequently, we can't then get our *call* wrong because it is about the relationship we have with a loving God. However, we can get an assignment wrong but this does not jeopardize our value to God, our relationship with him or our identity as his children. When we recognise that we are called to Christ and *given* an assignment, our discernment process will be marked by freedom and liberty, not compulsion, urgency or secrecy.

Discernment that builds relationship and clarifies the assignment

So what are the practices that we look for in pastors who come to Advisory Board that enable them to move through the discernment process with freedom and liberty? Below are suggestions we would suggest both increase the general wellbeing of pastors and are very helpful when working through a change in ministry assignment:

General Rhythm

Self:

- Regular times spent in God's Word and in prayer;
- Intentional times of retreat.

Peer:

- Accountability to others for your responses, responsibilities and personal holiness;
- The invitation for others to speak truthfully and honestly about the suitability of an assignment, assessment of how you are going and the things God is teaching you in a current assignment.

Coach/mentor:

- Scheduled input from a coach/mentor in areas of personal growth, self-awareness and ministry competency.

Church:

- Times of review and reflection regarding your ministry assignment (at 12 months, 3 years and 5 years).

Discernment surrounding a new ministry assignment

Peer:

- Objective feedback from peers regarding suitability of the new ministry assignment.

Coach/mentor:

- Support for and objective feedback from coach/mentor regarding suitability of the new ministry assignment.

Church:

- It may be appropriate to seek affirmation from a handful of trusted people in the current church leadership to consider or enter a formal discernment process in considering a new ministry assignment. Note that wisdom and care need to be exercised around doing this.

Spouse:

- Involvement of spouse in considering a new ministry assignment and ensuring their support and acceptance.

Questions to consider when evaluating the suitability of a new assignment

- Is there a difficulty with your current ministry assignment? If so, what does your coach/peers/spouse indicate as to the appropriateness of a new ministry assignment?
- Consider your tenure – do you believe you have achieved what God wanted you to do during this time?
- Do you have peace about pursuing this new assignment?
- Is there a strong sense of urgency to take up this new assignment? If yes, who or what is driving the urgency?
- Do you see your gifting/shape as a solution to the challenges faced by the church in your new ministry assignment?
- Who do you need to talk to so that you are going into any new ministry assignment with a complete understanding of what it will require of you?

Implications

If you are a pastor coming to the Advisory Board seeking to be considered for a potential ministry assignment, you will see that there is a new section in the application process (profile document) that covers the above areas. This will help us to ascertain where these practices are evidenced in your life and to gain your permission to contact people so that we have a thorough understanding of who you are and your suitability for a particular pastoral assignment.

There is no compulsion for pastors to have all of these things in place, however those who do so will generally find that when it comes to a time of discernment, the Advisory Board will then be in a position to give a more speedy and confident recommendation to a church as to the potential suitability of a particular person.

Advisory Board
Baptist Union of Victoria

