

God, “Bless What We Planned”

In this Pray Beyond, Phil Miglioratti, the head of ReImagine Network, interviews author Kim Butts about hearing God’s voice in decision making. It is based on her book *7 Prayers for Discernment and Decision Making* (PrayerShop Publishing).

PHIL >>> Kim, you have extensive experience across many church cultures. What did you discern that prompted you to write a guide to decision-making?

KIM >>> This is not a simple answer as it took a gradual “epiphany.” Although this book can be utilized for any number of purposes requiring discernment and/or decision-making, it was birthed from a need we (my husband, Dave, and I) had to find a bridge to a solution for a specific disconnect we were seeing in church after church across America.

For the past three decades, we have been in hundreds of churches to teach and train on prayer. Our passion for coming alongside of local churches and their leaders stems from the command of God given in Isaiah 56:7 and emphasized by Jesus in the gospels that His house is to be a “house of prayer for all nations.”

Scripture clearly teaches that we (both individually and corporately) are houses of prayer for all nations. God commands this clearly. Church leaders who desire to move this direction, first begin to look for tools and resources to help. Yet, there is a missing piece between realization of the command to become a house of prayer and the resources needed to grow in that direction. Tools and resources alone will not create and sustain a praying church. How could we help churches to move toward the reality of becoming a praying church that would be embedded deeply into their DNA?

Clarity came as I pursued my Masters in Spiritual Formation and Leadership. Using the questions Dave and I had about the

process of becoming a praying church, and prayerfully leaning into God to show us how to better help leaders, I was introduced to a deeper experience of waiting on God, listening prayer, seeking Him for clarity, etc.

The “missing piece” of the process of helping churches move from desiring to become praying churches to making progress that was more than superficial and/or temporary, began to take shape. God was showing me my own process of discernment to discover the plan we were to teach churches. Isn't that just like our amazing Father?!

The realization also came that there was actually no “one size fits all” formula or process to become a praying church. God has a creative, unique plan for every house of prayer. There is no cookie cutter or series of specific steps that will create a praying church simply by following human instructions or methods...which is the reason trying to pattern a church after the culture of another usually fails.

I believe God provides a roadmap of sorts – but only if leaders will do the spiritual work of discernment to see what that journey looks like for their own unique community of believers.

Helping leaders go through a process of discerning what God wants to do in and through them as a praying church was our “missing piece.” Having the input of the Holy Spirit through a guided process of deep humility, corporate prayer and unity provides the needed direction and guidance so that church leaders can move forward with clarity and a fuller understanding of what God's praying community looks like in their own context. Once that process takes place, the appropriate tools and spiritual disciplines with which to disciple people individually and corporately in prayer will take shape. A strong, vibrant house of prayer for all nations can emerge when we partner with the Spirit in the process.

PHIL >>> Explain “discernment prayer” and why it is so rare in leadership team planning.

KIM >>> Perhaps it’s good to first distinguish the differences between Christian discernment and decision-making. It is my opinion that the two are not synonymous as many believe. Some utilize the two words interchangeably. For our discussion purposes, I’m talking only about a group/corporate expression of discernment and decision-making; however, the prayer process in this book is easily adaptable for individual use.

Decision-making can be primarily an “external” process that looks at two or more options in order to choose which is “best.” We might choose to list pros and cons for each choice we are considering prior to making a decision that meets our goals in the most effective way.

Often, a vote is taken rather than engaging in a concerted effort to “discern” which option is the best and then allowing God to guide us into the unity of agreement together. Discernment is primarily an “internal” process. Church leaders are often too quick to ask God to bless what they are planning rather than to plan what God wants to bless.

I love Henri Nouwen’s description of discernment as opposed to decision-making: “Discernment...is about listening and responding to that place within us where our deepest desires align with God’s desire. As discerning people, we sift through our impulses, motives, and options to discover which ones lead us closer to divine love and compassion for ourselves and other people and which ones lead us further away. Discernment reveals new priorities, directions, and gifts from God.”

Both processes should always involve God; but only if a team of leaders or a group determine ahead of time that the outcome will be Spirit-led and God-determined rather than human-led and determined by humans. I believe that good decision-making also requires discernment; however, discernment does not

necessarily require decision-making. If we will make the time to invite the Father into our process and give Him the space to work in the midst of it, the path forward will become clear because hearts and minds will be unified as we yield to His plans and purposes.

Discernment takes time, and most leaders don't feel willing or able to carve out adequate space to seek God's guidance, either individually or corporately. In the book of Acts, church leaders were always seeking their next direction and guidance from God. The American Church has, to a great extent, lost its desire to wait on the Lord.

PHIL >>> Why is it "*crucial to seek the presence of God together*"?

KIM >>> When we talk about seeking God's presence in our current church culture, it is usually an individual pursuit. There is vulnerability involved in seeking God together corporately. This is why our corporate prayer gatherings are so small in most churches. And yet, God clearly tells us that "where two or more are gathered" He is in our midst. There is something unique about seeking Him corporately.

If we simply look at the book of Acts, we can see over and over again how people met together for the purpose of prayer. Out of those seasons of prayer, decisions were made and discernment occurred: choosing a new disciple to replace Judas, setting apart and sending out missionaries, the determination that waiting on tables was not for the leaders to do as God has called them to prayer and the ministry of the word...etc.

Corporate discernment is powerful when it becomes clear that the Spirit is leading, even when He does something we do not expect! When we lean on our own understanding, we can often miss the clarity we seek. There can be strong confirmation in corporate discernment and/or decision-making when unity in the

Spirit is sought.

PHIL >>> Please unpack these planning process insights:

“The spiritual process of discernment/decision-making is not a democracy.”

KIM >>> Again, in the church there is a human process and a spiritual one. *Of course, Christian business owners, schools, etc. also have to determine how they will choose options, hire staff, and expand vision/mission.

When we make every decision by voting, we are usually telling God that we don't need His intervention or help. There are times when the “majority” can get things wrong in God's eyes.

The need within a culture often determines how we operate. Will churches and Christian organizations follow Roberts Rules of Order or operate in the realm of the Holy Spirit?

In Scripture, God generally indicated when lots were to be cast, etc.; however, as demonstrated in the book of Acts, the situation was always brought before Him in prayer. Sometimes in the midst of prayer, God directed – even when no one was asking anything specific of Him: “While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’” (Acts 13:2). Can you imagine spending so much time in prayer as a church leadership that you hear this specifically from God?

“The Sovereign God, to a large extent, has limited the working of His power to the prayers of His people.”

KIM >>> We all know that God is perfectly capable of doing His will alone. However, Scripture is also clear that God wants to work through His people. For the sake of space, let's simply take two compelling passages. In Ezekiel 22:30 we read: “I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall and

stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found no one. So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign Lord.” Standing before God in the “gap” is a picture of an intercessor. God was looking for someone to pray so that He would not have to destroy Israel for their sinfulness. But because He could find no one to pray, destruction came upon them.

A different result took place in Exodus 32:9-14 when the people of Israel crafted a golden calf and began to worship it while Moses was on the mountain with the Lord. Psalm 106:23 puts this event simply: “So he said he would destroy them had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him to keep his wrath from destroying them.” Moses interceded on behalf of the people, asking God to show them mercy because of His promise to Abraham. The result: “And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people” (Exodus 32:14).

God wants to be sought out by His people and wants to build a loving two-way relationship with us. If He didn't there would be no purpose for the relationship that is prayer

“Don't forget to stop, reflect, discuss, share, ask questions...”

KIM >>> The discernment process is just that – a process. It is the tendency of many leaders to desire to quickly and efficiently get from point A to point B when God may have a different journey in mind. This is why decision-making can sometimes over-rule discernment when taking the time to hear from God is taking too long from our human perspective. This is how we can miss the perfect will and plan of God.

As an example, let's go back to a church leadership trying to determine what God wants their house of prayer (praying

church) to look like. Without taking time to engage with God prayerfully, it is more likely that a human decision will be made rather than a spiritual one. It's easy to miss God's best when we are in a hurry to accomplish an outcome rather than taking the time to truly hear the voice of God together.

It is important for a group to engage the dynamics of "stopping, reflecting, discussing, sharing and asking questions" together in order to stay in unity with the Spirit and with one another. If one or more in the group is unwilling to engage the process, or is feeling sidelined, confused or marginalized without being able to express those feelings...the path toward a unified consensus will become very difficult. This is why a process of moving through specific seasons of prayer can be so valuable to the process of discernment. It will help to get our human selves out of the way and allow God to move in our midst.

"The Prayer of Listening..."

KIM >>> The spiritual discipline of listening prayer is not one we cultivate well in the church today. Rushing into God's presence with our requests and concerns sometimes causes us to miss what God may want to talk to us about or teach us.

Continually staying attentive to the presence of God through listening to His voice is important if we truly want the Father's plan rather than our own. In our humanness, we struggle to wait in silence and try to fill that void with unnecessary speech – even when it is prayer.

"The Prayer of Unity..."

KIM >>> Unity of heart, mind and purpose is necessary in both decision-making and discernment. If unity doesn't take place in all three of these areas, there can be resentment, frustration, lack of participation, confusion, bitterness, poor communication, etc. The prayer of unity seeks God for His will, plan and purpose for us as a corporate body...so that what

we decide or discern is something every group member can wholeheartedly know that God has led us to His best for us. The prayer of unity requires us to lay aside our personal agendas, our “my way is best” mentality, and our preferences to embrace what God may wish to do. In unity we are able to come into agreement together and have a consensus about how God wants us to proceed. He may choose to work through one or more team members who are most yielded to His Spirit or give the same “idea” or “vision” to everyone at once. Regardless, everyone will be able to wholeheartedly be on the “same page” and be of one heart and mind on whatever is being discerned or decided. There is a high level of trust required – of God and of one another.

PHIL >>> Kim, please write a prayer readers can pray, for themselves but also for their leaders, as they seek to find God’s direction in their plans and projects.

KIM >>> Father, You have not given us a spirit of fear or timidity, but one of power, love and self-discipline! Teach us how to seek Your heart as we face decisions that need to be made in our lives, churches, businesses and homes. May Your word continually be a light for our paths and a lamp for our feet as we discern Your best kingdom plan. When we are uncertain about how to move forward, or when we need the guidance of Your Spirit, hear our prayers!

Sovereign Lord, our leaders are so busy and their plates are full. Teach them to seek You wholeheartedly for Your best plan or way forward individually and as a team. Unite their hearts in Your great love, give them humility to set aside their plans in favor of what You may want to do. Help them to listen and take the necessary time to wait upon You before making human choices that may be less than Your perfect choice. Help them to learn Your “unforced rhythms of grace” in seasons of rest and retreat individually and together so that they are better able to hear Your voice.

Teach us to trust Your ability to lead us all into our best possible kingdom life. In Jesus' name we ask! Amen!