



Finding The Way

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She led me astray again. I knew the directions pretty well, but I decided to rely on my phone's map function to point the way. Maybe I would save a few minutes on my way to the church. As I neared my destination, the British woman who lives in my phone told me to turn right onto a small lane, and I dutifully complied. The lane took me into a cemetery.

That in itself didn't trouble me too much. The church was adjacent to a cemetery, and I was game for a shortcut. With each twist and turn, however, I began to doubt her directions. When the British lady instructed me to turn left and begin an off-road journey among the headstones, however, I finally stopped listening. Using the signposts in the cemetery, I navigated out and eventually found my way to the church.

When I told my husband this story, he shook his head, "If she told you to drive off a cliff, would you do it?" No, of course not. I might get pretty close to the edge though.

On the winding path that is our Christian faith journey, we hear many voices. Some are generally trustworthy and neutral; others have an agenda that might not align with our best interests. Some voices, even if they have a charming accent, are not Spirit-led. As Christians and as the Church, we become good at decisionmaking, in reliance on these voices. Often they suffice when the decision is routine. Sometimes though, we need more.

For example, our Nominating Committees look for people with gifts to serve in particular roles. Service is part of our discipleship and an acknowledgement of our spiritual gifts. Knowing a person's secular experience can be one factor to consider. A pastor search committee can read PIF's from the CLC's match with their MIF's (for those of you who have gone through this recently, you know exactly what I'm saying in my acronym soup!) looking for a good fit with the congregation. Sessions can hear the recommendations of medical professionals and the Wisconsin Council of Churches about when to gather in person and when to move to virtual worship. All these voices provide data points that help our decisionmaking.

If we only rely on the data points though, we can find ourselves wandering off-road or, worse, approaching a cliff. When we gather as the church, we are invited to a holy space of discernment. We bring our experiences, our gifts for decisionmaking, and our data points, and then we intentionally seek God's will for us. Notably, our discernment must always be a choice between two good things; we are never trying to discern whether to do good or do evil because evil is never God's intention. In our discernment, we listen to the voices available to us, seek out others to broaden our perspective, and read the signposts. Then we silence the barrage of competing voices and pray patiently for the Spirit to guide us.

The same is true in our personal lives, whenever we wrestle with decisions about relationships, vocation, stewardship and more.

Discernment takes time. It rarely offers shortcuts. With watchfulness though, we can see the signs of fruitful discernment. Consistent messages from varying sources can be a sign we're on the right track. Having necessary pieces fall into place (getting the permit, receiving a critical donation, the perfect volunteer stepping up, etc.) is another sign. A profound sense of peace and, ultimately, joy both signal we're discerning God's will. In this new year, I pray your faithful discernment will point the way to the wholeness God desires.