

Although the process of group discernment and time away to do it are very old, most people are unaware of it—or do not feel confident about how to make it work. ‘Towards New Horizons’ will go some way towards helping groups that would like to try it. There are also people who are trained and skilled who would be happy to work alongside them in drawing on the traditions as we go forward together in hope. It may be particularly useful to Parish Pastoral Councils, or Finance Committees—or combinations of the two. It would also be possible for a parish to take part—though this might need careful facilitating.

The idea is very simple and has three stages:

- A meeting locally where the concerns or important business is stated.
- A time away—a day, for example. This gives an opportunity to step back from the immediacy of the situation and to gain new perspectives on it. Towards the end of the session, ideas and insights are gathered to bring back.
- A meeting locally where things are brought together and, if possible, conclusions come to or decisions reached with some ideas as to how to take things forward.

The outlines can be used as they are or – more likely – can form the basis of something tailored to the needs of your own community.

More information, including a useful set of resources on group decision-making can be found at: www.ignatianspirituality.com

For more information, also see the “Exploring the Way” CD, diocesan website or contact the Department for Spirituality on 0191 243 3302 or email: spirituality@diocesehn.org.uk



Towards New Horizons

The Art of Discernment for Groups and Communities



All organisations go through times of change and the Church is no different. Since the days of the first disciples, the Church has not stood still but has responded to the needs of the people among whom it is placed.

New situations arise constantly and the people of God need to read the signs of the times and work out how best to witness to Christ and his Gospel so that the message of salvation and hope continues to be spread. This process is called discernment and the “Exploring the Way” CD has outlines for a short series of meetings (including a day of reflection) which might help in employing this art during the deliberations in your community as part of our journey forward together in hope..



The method being proposed owes much to the spirituality developed by St Ignatius of Loyola. It has stood the test of time and has had a resurgence of popularity in recent years as people have found that it is a method that works both for individuals and for groups.

It is not a route for a snap decision but a process that involves listening to the Holy Spirit and to one another. The group gradually refines its understanding of where the Spirit is leading until it comes to the point at which everyone is “on board” and a decision can be taken that moves things forward. It does not underestimate the importance of good leadership but ensures that the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking through each person is heard.

Although the method is drawn from the Ignatian tradition, it can, perhaps, trace its origins to the Council of Jerusalem when the early Church had to work out how to deal with new converts. We are told in Acts 15 that there was much debate but people also listened in silence to what Paul and Barnabas were saying as well as reflection on the scriptures and the traditions and beliefs of the community. Eventually, the Council came to a conclusion that opened the way for the faith to flourish in the known world of the time. The combination of listening and trusting the Holy Spirit has proven powerful throughout the history of the Church.

In his Rule of Life for monks and nuns, St Benedict also used this wisdom when he wrote:



‘Whenever any important business has to be done in the monastery, let the Abbot call together the whole community and state the matter to be acted upon. Then, having heard the brethren's advice, let him turn the matter over in his own mind and do what he shall judge to be most expedient. The reason we have said that all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals to the younger what is best.’

Rule of Benedict, Chapter 3

The diocese is much bigger than a monastery and Bishop Séamus cannot call everyone together in one room as an abbot can. Through *Forward Together in Hope* he can, however, consult his brothers and sisters in Christ and listen to the Spirit at work through the people of the diocese.

Another important aid to discernment and reflection was very much favoured by Jesus—getting away from it all. He would often take himself off before dawn to pray and tune his heart into the heart of the Father. He passed this wisdom on to the first disciples when he said to them,



‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.’

Mark 6: 31-32