

Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups
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"Pursuing God's Will Together is a much-needed corrective to our headstrong individualism today. It drills down deep into rock-bed practicalities for any community seeking to discern the will of God together."

—Richard J. Foster,
 author of *Celebration of Discipline* and
Sanctuary of the Soul

Becoming a Community for Discernment

Discernment, in a most general sense, is the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and the activity of God—both in the ordinary moments and in the larger decisions of our lives. The apostle Paul says that we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds *so that* we can discern what the will of God is, that which is good, acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:2). This includes not only the mind of each individual but also the corporate mind.

Discernment literally means *to separate, to discriminate, to determine, to decide* or *to distinguish* between two things. Spiritual discernment is the ability to distinguish or discriminate between good (that which is of God and draws us closer to God) and evil (that which is not of God and draws us away from God). There are many qualities that contribute to good leadership, but it is our commitment to *discerning and doing the will of God* through the help of the Holy Spirit that distinguishes spiritual leadership from other kinds of leadership.

Corporate or leadership discernment, then, is the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and activity of God *as a leadership group* relative to the issues we are facing, and to make decisions in response to that awareness. Spiritual leaders are distinguished by their commitment to discern important matters together so they can affirm a shared sense of God's desire for them and move forward on that basis.

It is hard to imagine that spiritual leadership could be about anything *but* seeking to know and do the will of God, and yet many leadership groups do not have this as their clear mandate and reason for existence. This raises a question: If we are not pursuing the will of God together in fairly intentional ways, what are we *doing*? Our own will? What seems best according to our own thinking and planning? That which is merely strategic or expedient or good for the ego?

Discernment together as leaders, on the other hand, opens us to an entirely different reality—the wisdom of God that is beyond human wisdom and is available to us as we learn how to open ourselves to it (1 Cor 2:6-16). This

approach to leadership presents unique challenges because it requires us to move beyond reliance on human thinking and strategizing to a place of deep listening and response to the Spirit of God within and among us. This is not to dismiss what human wisdom and strategic thinking have to offer us. Our ability to think things through and apply reason to our decision making is a gift from God; however, the Scriptures are clear that human wisdom and the wisdom of God are not the same thing, and part of becoming more discerning is the ability to distinguish between the two (1 Cor 1:18-31).

One of the challenges to leadership discernment is that it can seem somewhat subjective and even mystical, which doesn't always go over too well with hard-nosed business people and pragmatists—those who often make up boards and other leadership groups. It is one thing to rely on what feels like a more subjective approach when it pertains to our personal life, but it feels much riskier when our decisions involve large budgets, other people's financial investments, the lives of multiple staff, reports to high-powered boards and serving a "customer base" (congregation or organization) with varying levels of expectation. And yet many leaders today are longing for a way of leading that is more deeply responsive to the will of God than to the latest ideas from a *New York Times* bestseller. We wonder, *Is there a trustworthy process that enables Christian leaders to actively seek God relative to decisions we are making?*

The answer is a resounding yes! and it is why I have written this book—to provide practical guidance for leaders and leadership teams who want to enter more deeply into the process of corporate discernment as a way of life in leadership.

—From the introduction, *"From Decision-Making to Discernment"*



Ruth Haley Barton,
author of *Pursuing
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thetransformingcenter.org

An Interview with Ruth Haley Barton, author of *Pursuing God's Will Together*

How is *Pursuing God's Will Together* different than other books on leadership?

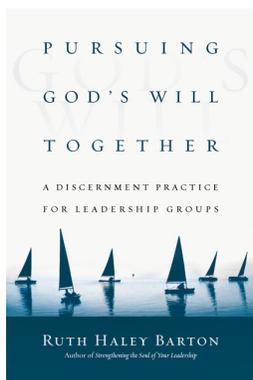
Ruth Haley Barton: This is a book for leaders and leadership groups to read and experience together. Not only does it help leaders reflect on discerning and doing God's will as the heart of spiritual leadership, it offers them a step-by-step process for becoming a community for discernment at the leadership level along with an actual practice for corporate discernment. This book is designed to be a one-stop shop for leadership groups who want to shift their approach to leadership from a model that relies primarily on human decision making and strategic planning to an approach that is defined by the spiritual practice of corporate discernment.

You write that the process of becoming a community for discernment involves preparing leaders for discernment, becoming a community of discernment at the leadership level and engaging an actual process for discerning God's will together as leaders. Why is the preparation more important than the actual process of discernment?

Ruth: In Romans 12:2 Paul writes that we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds *so that* we can discern the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. This seems to indicate that our spiritual transformation is a prerequisite to our ability to discern—both personally and corporately. It is important to note that Paul is not primarily addressing individuals here. He is addressing a community of believers gathered in Rome and giving all sorts of instruction about how to be a community that is distinctly Christian. What I take from this passage and what I have learned through experience working with many leadership groups, including my own, is that if leaders are on an intentional journey of spiritual transformation alone and together, discernment will begin to happen quite naturally even without a process. Conversely, if they are not involved in an intentional process of transformation, they will not be able

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AUTHOR INTERVIEW



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to do much discernment, even if they have a process. There are too many human dynamics that get in the way.

What are some of the obstacles to discernment?

Ruth: Chapter one of *Pursuing God's Will Together* is an extended reflection on John 9 in which many individuals and groups of people—all very religious—saw the same man healed by Jesus but for all sorts of different reasons were not able to discern the work of God in their midst. The “obstacles to seeing” that were at work in this story are the same obstacles we experience today. Like the disciples, we might be asking the wrong questions—questions about theology and blame rather than questions about what God is doing and how we can get on board with it. Like the neighbors, we might be so caught in our paradigm regarding the way things have always been that we can't recognize anything new that God might be doing. We might be like the Pharisees who were so caught up in preserving the religious system they were a part of that they expelled any person or any experience that threatened it. Or we might be like the parents, who recognized that God was doing something new but were afraid to say so.

What is the Transforming Church™ network, and how does *Pursuing God's Will Together* fit in with what is going on in that network?

Ruth: The Transforming Church network is an affiliation of leaders of churches and ministry organizations committed to becoming communities of spiritual transformation that discern and do the will of God. A major component of becoming a Transforming Church or ministry organization is the commitment to discerning and doing this will of God. We will be teaching this subject as part of our new program, Leading a Transforming Church, and it is our prayer that this published resource will equip and empower leaders to go back and practice leadership discernment in their settings.

How do you hope *Pursuing God's Will Together* will be used?

Ruth: My first prayer is that this book will cast vision for discernment as the heart of spiritual leadership in a church/Christian ministry culture that

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has relied quite heavily on secular leadership models over the last number of years. Closely related to that prayer is my hope that many leaders will be moved to drive a stake in the ground and commit themselves to discerning and doing God's will as the focus of their leadership. In fact, we are planning to develop a response mechanism that allows leaders to make a statement of intent around this conviction. Then, my final hope and prayer is that entire leadership groups will engage the book together and take the step-by-step journey of becoming leadership communities that discern and do the will of God.

BIO

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Ruth Haley Barton,
author of *Pursuing
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Ruth Haley Barton (Doctor of Divinity, Northern Seminary) is founding president of the Transforming Center, a spiritual formation ministry to pastors and Christian leaders. A trained spiritual director (Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation), teacher and retreat leader, she has served on the pastoral staff of several churches, including Willow Creek Community Church. A sought-after teacher, preacher and consultant to leadership teams, she is currently adjunct professor of spiritual transformation at Northern Seminary.

Educated at Wheaton College, Northern Seminary and Loyola University Chicago Institute for Pastoral Studies, Ruth is the author of numerous books and resources on the spiritual life, including *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*, *Sacred Rhythms*, *Longing for More* and *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* (all InterVarsity Press), *An Ordinary Day with Jesus: Experiencing the Reality of God in Your Everyday Life* (coauthor, Willow Creek Resources), and an online resource titled *eReflections*, spiritual guidance via e-mail. She also contributes regularly to *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation*.

Visit thetransformingcenter.org for more information about Ruth and to read her blog posts.