

What's Brewing | Congregational Discernment

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Blake Smith, Craig Perryman

Blake Smith 00:27

Hello, and welcome to What's Brewing, a Project Zion Podcast series where we ask the questions, "What is mission?" And, "Why does it matter?" Today we're going to be talking a little bit more than about mission, but how we get there through congregational discernment. I'm your host, Blake Smith, and today I'm here with a great friend of mine, Craig Perryman. Craig, you're, as far as I know, new to the Project Zion Podcast series, so why don't you give us a little bit of background for our listeners so they can get to know you better.

Craig Perryman 00:59

So, Greg Perryman, I'm married to a lovely young lady named Tami Perryman. We have three kids of our own, but we actually claim about 20, because they've just been such an intimate part of our family over the course of the years, and they're all spread out all over, all over the nation. And that makes us happy. Everywhere we go, we've got somebody to visit. I've been an ordained minister in Community of Christ since I think 1994, and Pastor of four congregations, pastor of four congregations, and now I'm the Invitation Support Minister in Chicago, Illinois.

Blake Smith 01:44

Awesome, awesome. So those congregations that you were pastor for, were you self-sustaining pastor or full time pastor in those roles?

Craig Perryman 01:52

Both. I started out in Highland, Indiana. I was pastor there for nine years, self-sustained pastor, and had been feeling a call for a number of years to go into full-time ministry. And long about just in 2007, I was I was carrying around all the job descriptions from World Church with me every single week, I would, I would download new job descriptions on a weekly basis, and just walk around with them. And finally, one day, my wife said, why don't you just call on one of them? And so I did, and I called the there were three pasture positions available at the time one was in Bermuda, one was in Southern California, and one was in Council Bluffs, Iowa. And the only one I called on was Council Bluffs, Iowa, which my wife hasn't forgiven me for yet. So...

Blake Smith 02:40

You were desperate to get out of Indiana, it didn't matter where you could go.

Craig Perryman 02:43

Pretty much, pretty much. No, I can't tell you why. But that was the first. I think it was a God thing. That was the first congregation that I felt called to, to place a call to and see what was going on. And I honestly picked up the phone, and I called Tom Arnold out there. Talk about he's a water walker. He is just he's, he's the closest thing to God. I know. And I called him up and and started talking to him about the position and we talked for about two hours that night. And I think we both knew then that this was where I was supposed to go. So I never even bothered with the other ones.

Blake Smith 03:22

Wow, that's a neat story in itself. We can probably do a whole episode just on that. Let's make that the next one. Well, the four congregations that you pastored they were also in variety of places geographically right around the country. Yeah. You weren't just being passed around a Mission Center, right?

Craig Perryman 03:41

No, you take him... no, you take him. That would be more like it. Yeah. No. So it was, like I said, started as self-sustained in Indiana, went to Council Bluffs, Iowa as a full-time pastor there. Then I went to Bend, Oregon as a Congregational Support Minister. I was Associate Pastor and Congregational Support Minister, in Bend, Oregon. And then from there, I went to Southern California, Orange California to be their pastor, and then came back here to the Chicagoland area.

Blake Smith 04:12

Okay, and because I am also from Chicagoland area. I happen to know that while here and serving in the Invitational Support Minister role, you did also serve as a pastor for one of the congregations here on a self_sustaining basis. Well, it's a tremendous amount of experience. Most folks who serve in a pastor role tend to do it in one geographic area. So I think the fact that you bring to the table that diversity of experience in congregations and the different cultures around the US anyway is really helpful. So we're here to talk today, as you know, and as I mentioned earlier about discerning God's will for congregations... congregational discernment. But I want to start and just take just a little bit of time, Craig, if you don't mind, to talk about the role that discernment plays in your own life, what does discernment mean to you? What does it look like? etc.

Craig Perryman 04:26

That's true. That's true of the congregation. And that was a great year. Yeah. it was. I mean, that's a great question in and of itself. Discernment for me is the very most important part of my faith life. Because in my mind, the very goal of discernment, most of the time when, when we as church members think about discernment, we're thinking about going through some kind of a process where we, we figure out what the ministry is that our congregation is supposed to be doing, or, or who's supposed to be our pastor, or whether we should close our doors. Something along those lines, it's it's a matter of, of coming together and finding, consolidate around a particular idea that the congregation needs to make a decision about. That's what we usually think of when we think about discernment. That's not how I view discernment. For me, the very goal of discernment is to give everything we are in order to try to enter in to a deeper and more intimate relationship with God. That's the beginning,

middle and end of discernment for me, to try to enter into a deeper, more intimate relationship with God every single day. Growing in that relationship. Relationship is a two-way street. But I find that a lot of us in the Christian church, treat it as a one-way street. Have you ever had one of those relationships? Where you're the only one making the phone call? (Oh, yeah) You're the only one checking in, you're the only one doing it. And the only time you hear from the other person is when they need something, that that's how we tend to treat our relationship with God. I think many of us as Christians, and I hoping myself in that category,

Blake Smith 07:00

I'm hoping there's nobody listening that feels that way about me. But probably, it probably has happened.

Craig Perryman 07:07

Probably for all of us. Yeah. But But relationship is a two-way street. And for me, discernment is all about holding up our end of that relationship and not just holding it up because we have to, but longing to. When you grow into a slight even a slightly deeper relationship with God, and you begin to experience that touch from God in your life, you begin to experience in a very tactile way, feeling God with you. God's presence with you more and more frequently. The hunger in the depth of your soul just grows to have more and more and more of God in your life. So it's, it's all about that process. Now out of that process. Once. Once you're growing in that intimate relationship with God, then other things come from that knowing God more helps you to understand God's will better. And, knowing God more helps you to hear God's voice more clearly among all of the noise in the world around you. So so then we can start hearing what God's calling us to we can start understanding more who God's calling us to become and what kinds of things God's asking us to do. But all of those things are outcroppings. They're results of the primary goal which is entering into a deeper, more intimate relationship with God.

Blake Smith 08:41

Thank you, that's really helpful. I do want to step back and pick up on something that you said because knowing you as I do, I think that I want to give you an opportunity in case one of our listeners might miss hear something you said. You said the beginning the middle and end of discernment. Can you say a little bit more about the end of discernment?

Craig Perryman 08:59

There isn't one. Okay. Yeah, there absolutely isn't. And that, yeah, it's a great point. Because of the way we've treated discernment, you know, generally speaking, it's we've talked about that in terms of, you know, every five years, we come together as a congregation over a weekend retreat or something, and we discern what God's calling us to, and then we put it on the shelf for another five to 10 years, and then we come back together and do it again. Discernment becomes a way of daily life. Relationship like that is the thing that you go through every single day. You're in relationship with your spouse or your children, that's a daily event. And the same thing holds true with being in relationship with God, and you just want to keep going deeper and deeper in that relationship every single day.

Blake Smith 09:41

That's pretty much how I thought you would answer the question, but I picked up on that. And I know because we you and I have also talked about the fact that that people do that with one particular goal in mind. And when I'm done with that, I'm done with discernment. Or, you know, when we're discerning who is called to lead our congregation and somebody said It's up and says I'll do it. Great! we're done, we're done. We don't need to discern anything else and, and I was pretty sure that that's not the way that that you see it. So

Craig Perryman 10:10

That's not. And our church is uniquely poised for discernment, among so many of the other denominations out there. Our church believes in a living God. And we believe that God's God wants intimate relationship with each of us wants to be in communication with each of us, wants to talk with each of us every single day. It's part of what brought me into the church in the first place, because I wasn't raised in the RLDS church or the Community of Christ, I'm a convert to this church from another faith tradition, that didn't so much believe in that kind of thing. Knowing that we believe in a living God, we should act like we believe in a living God.

Blake Smith 10:51

Great, right. Just one more thing on that, because as I was thinking about some of the conversations that you and I have had in the past, there is place to ask some specific questions, then that might have an end for that particular question. But that's a piece of a larger process. Right?

Craig Perryman 11:08

Yeah, absolutely. And, that comes from that relationship, though. It still begins with the relationship. But yeah, they're absolutely figuring out who the pastor is supposed to be. What kind of ministries we're supposed to do, who we're supposed to be as a people are all outcroppings of that relationship, it comes, and it comes easier, because we hear God's voice and we can recognize God's voice now. It comes easier because we we know God just a little bit better than we did yesterday. So we can figure those things out a lot easier.

Blake Smith 11:40

That's great. Now, you mentioned just a few minutes ago, too, that you weren't part of this tradition, being Community of Christ, all your life and now being a part of that and recognizing that this particular denomination is perched right in the right place to be able to do discernment because of the things that we believe and understand, but so was it I'm interested to know if it was in that shift, or if there was another time in your life where you can say, this is when I knew I needed to give intentional time to discernment to listening to God's voice in my life?

Craig Perryman 12:22

I love that question. But it's a really difficult one for me to answer because I think I can look back now. And I can say to you that yes, it was all part of that shift. But that was just the first step. You know, it's like the the little baby learning how to walk. So that was the first time that I stood up. And, you know, my parents let go of my hands, and I fell down, and then decided that was the coolest thing in the world. So I was gonna get back up again. So that first shift going from the faith tradition that I was raised in that I should start by saying to you, I guess that the, the faith tradition that I was raised in, or at least my take

on that tradition, and I can only claim that, is one in which I learned about a God that was a much more judgmental and vengeful God. One that was literally waiting to zap the bejesus out of me if I ever stepped out of line, and I did daily. So I had spent the first 23-24 years of my life literally hoping and praying, and scared to death. Hoping and praying that God wouldn't even know that I existed. In to the very core of my soul, I hoped God didn't know I was there. Because I knew if God didn't know that I was there. God was going to smite me. I gave God so many reasons to. And so one night... My wife's family that lived down in South Carolina, we lived up here in the Chicagoland area. And we often when we went down to visit them, we would travel overnight. So it's a 14-hour drive. And that way our two children would sleep almost the entire way. And so, in the middle of the night, as you're going through the mountains and the white lines going past, you start becoming blurred, and they start waving around and everything you come up with any topics that you can come up with to talk about just to keep yourselves awake. And one night my wife wanted to talk to me about what faith tradition we were gonna raise our children and she had been a part of the RLDS church for quite some time. I obviously was not. And she said, you know, she really didn't want to raise them in the faith tradition. I was a part of would it be okay, if we raised them in the RLDS tradition, and I said, you know, Tami, I just really don't care. One faith tradition, we raised the kids Oh, wow. And she sat quiet for a couple of minutes and then she said, how can you not care? And, and I sat there Without saying anything because I knew what the answer was, but I was embarrassed by the answer. And finally I said to her, I had been running from God all my life. Because I know who I am. And I know that I'm not a fraction of who God wants me to be. And so I've been running from God, it doesn't matter to me, what relate what what denomination, we bring our children up in. I want them to know God, but I don't have a relationship with God, so I can't tell you which faith tradition to raise them in, and I don't care. And now it was my wife's turn to sit quiet for a couple of minutes. And finally, she said to me, she said, you know how much your dad loves you right? And I do. My dad was a was an incredible father, for me always wanted to be involved in whatever I was in when I wanted to play football. He played. He coached football, when, when my sisters wanted to play softball league coach softball, he was always intimately involved in everything we were doing. And so I said to her, yeah, of course, I know how much my dad loves me. She says, Okay. But you know, your dad's got some issues, right? You know, your dad has a really bad temper. I mean, when it goes, it goes. And I said, Yeah, I know. I've been there, done that. And she says, and, you know, he's, he's a little obnoxious. And I said, he's a lot obnoxious. And she said, Any, he's even a little bit of a bigot. And I said, Okay, I get it. My dad's not perfect. All right, enough! And she said, Well, if your dad who is as messed up as quite frankly, your dad can be sometimes loves you, to the extent that your dad loves you. How much more do you think that a God who is pure love loves you? I had never in my life thought of God as pure love. And I know that those words may sound to the folks that are listening, like, okay, big deal that there was nothing profound in that. And there's not. And yet, in that moment, somehow, somehow, those words, touched the very center of my soul, as nothing had ever done before. No words from any sermon haven't had ever touched me like that. Nothing had ever hit me the way those words, the truth of those words, made themselves known within me. And as I was driving through the mountains of North Carolina, I suddenly started to wonder, is it actually possible that I could start running to God instead of away from God? Would it be possible that God would ever want me in God's presence, not even realizing that I was already there? And, that was the beginning of discernment for me. It was the first time I honestly felt like, like, I was getting a message from God. And the the message that I was getting from God was, was open arms and saying, yeah, come. I've been here all the time. Come now. Didn't know that that's what it was. And it took many

years after that before I started to figure out that that's what it was. But I think that was the moment that it started.

Blake Smith 18:15

Wow, that's deeply personal. Thanks for sharing that. Craig. I'm wondering, and maybe you've already really answered the question. I'm wondering, since you got to the point in your life where you said, discernment is important. And I need to stop running and listen, God, is there anything that you could say, scares you to death about saying, God? What do you want me to do? Or, or what do you have in store for my life? That would maybe keep you from wanting to do discernment? Because I know there are people probably listening who feel that way. I know, I have felt that way that if I asked God, God might answer if I say the mission, prayer God might answer. And I'm not sure I'm ready for that.

Craig Perryman 18:57

So the the short answer to that is yes. Because I think God always wants us to stretch our boundaries. I think all God always wants to stretch our boundaries, because it causes us to rely on God. And the the lesson I think God is constantly trying to teach us is I'm going to be there with you. If we're in relationship and we're working together, I'm going to be there with you. You're not going to be doing it alone. When in that first pastors position in Highland, Indiana that I was in, the only thing that I knew when I became a pastor was that I didn't know nearly enough to be a good pastor, to this group of really incredible saints in that community. I absolutely adored them. They had enveloped me and my family and absolute love and I wanted to serve them as best I could. And and I knew nothing about being a pastor. So I became a police chaplain because in the state of Indiana when you're a police chaplain, you have to go through continuing ed vacation every year. So I was going to learn stuff that maybe could help me be a better pastor than I was otherwise going to be. And I was one of four police chaplains in the town of Highland. Our primary job at that point was to do ride alongs with the officers and support them build relationship with them, so that if things got really difficult for them on the job, they could talk to us, instead of going home and taking it out on family or on other citizens in the community. Secondly, we were also the people that went out and met with families whose loved ones had just died in car accidents or whatever might take place. We were the ones who went to go visit with the families, and we would be on call for a week at a time. So one week at a time we were on call. My second week on call. It was two o'clock in the morning and the phone rang. And I grabbed my phone and my heart was racing and my knees were banging together because it's never good news at two o'clock in the morning, you know, not when you have teenagers. It was never good news. And so I jumped up and I grabbed the phone and the voice on the other end. He said Chaplain Perryman. And I said yes. And he says Chaplain, we've got a situation here, there's a woman, we got a call from a young boy telling us that his mom was threatening to kill herself. We need you to come, come join us. And I said, Okay, give me a couple of minutes to get dressed. Come on over and I'll meet you down in the driveway. They said, Sir, we're already here. So luckily, that night, I just dropped my clothes by the side of the bed, that I always dropped the clothes. Let's just be honest. So I jumped out of bed, grab my grab my scriptures, grabbed my oil and got dressed and was racing outside. And I got into the car with this officer and he was giving me a little bit of background on it in the couple of minute drive that it took this Highlands not a big towners, you know, and a couple of minutes it took us to get to the location, you gave me a little bit of background. And then just as he was finishing, we pulled up underneath a streetlight out in front of on a very secluded street. And he said that's the house right there. Pastor,

good luck. And he dropped me off. And I stepped out of the car. And he drove away. And I stood in the middle of the street that night, and every part of every fiber in my body was quaking. I mean it was, I was electric. I was so nervous, I was so afraid. I thought to myself, What in the world have I gotten? What have I gotten not just myself into, but more importantly, what have I gotten that woman inside there into? Because I don't know anything to say to her. I have no training in this. I'm not the least bit equipped to walk into that room and talk to a woman who is threatening to take her own life... telling her child that she's going to take her own life. What words can I come up with that is going to have any meaning to her whatsoever. And I looked up as I was saying these things, I was looking up into the sky because for whatever reason, that's what I what I was doing. And I just looked up into the sky and I said, God, I promised you that I would go wherever you wanted me to go, and I would do whatever you wanted me to do. As long as you went with me. I'm holding up my end, you better hold up yours. And literally, I cannot tell you how I even got to the door. But as I finished thinking that I was standing at the front door, and I just knocked on the door and this little boy couldn't have been more than eight came and opened up the door. And I said Hi there. I'm Chaplain Perryman from the police department, I understand your mom was not doing real well, would it be possible for me to talk to her and a voice yelled out from the living room saying let him in. And I went in and I saw this woman sitting in her living room. And I don't remember anything after that. I honestly don't remember another thing that took place after that, except I remember walking home that morning. The sun was up and and I was walking back to my to my home. I don't remember what was said. I don't remember any other part of that night. Except the next day was Sunday. And I was down in the fellowship hall of the Highland congregation teaching Sunday school class, and I heard somebody come in through the doors it just always happens because nobody shows up to a Sunday school class. I'm teaching on time. And and there was a little bit of discussion up on the landing and then and then I could hear people coming down. And this little face turned around the wall once they got to the bottom of the stairs and it was the little boy and then his mom came around him on the other side and she had chosen to come to Sunday school and they were both standing there with great big smiles on their faces. For the life of me I don't know. I have no idea what happened that night but obviously, whatever God did worked for her in that moment then I haven't kept in touch, I pray that she's still doing well. But that was, that was one of the lessons that God gave me to understand that, that when God asks me to do something, I won't ever be doing it alone. And it's those kinds of lessons that help us to move in our lives from believing in God, to having faith in God. And those are two very different things for me, in the way I put those things together, in my mind, believing that God exists is one thing. But having faith in God means that I place all of my trust in God. And that's a whole different set of circumstances that involves so much more of who I am.

Blake Smith 25:50

Well, I'm going to hope that our listeners hung on to the last part that you said, God is always with you. Otherwise, they may be absolutely scared to death of ever trying to discern what God wants for their life.

Craig Perryman 26:02

But it's those moments that fill you with a feeling that says, Look at what God could do in the world around you. If we would just learn to trust in God completely. If we if we could honestly sit back and say to ourselves, God wants nothing, but the very best for me, and for you and for us. So when God says to me, this is what you should do, if I truly believe that, I want to do that with everything that I am. Because

I truly trust that not only does God know more than I do, is God capable of doing more than I do than I can. But God has my best interest in our best interest at heart.

Blake Smith 26:48

Well, I certainly appreciate the energy, I know that our listeners don't get to see you and the passion

Craig Perryman 26:56

You're welcome.

Blake Smith 27:00

The passion that you have for that. And that reinforces the, the positive side of discernment to say, yeah, it might be scary. And it might, it might be challenging, and it might call you out of your comfort zone. Most likely it will. But what comes out of that is this intense (life-changing) life-changing faith and yeah, so. So thank you. Thank you for that. So let's talk a little bit about

Craig Perryman 27:28

You put these things much better than I do. I think, why don't we let me do the questions?

Blake Smith 27:32

Nope, nope, nope, nope. Let's talk a little bit about the congregational discernment process. So you've done it with and you've engaged in the process, with a number of congregations as I understand it. With each congregation, it's different, it might look different. But let's talk about the process first, and then we might, we might get some insight into how that might look different because I think what we would want our listeners to hear is that there's not a cookie-cutter way of doing discernment. We're in different contexts and cultures and circumstances and with different resources, etc. So we don't have to try to be someone else or do it somebody else's way. Where does a congregation start? What are some of the questions that maybe a group of people a congregation or a small group, a house church that's wanting discern God's will for them, what are some of the things they need to focus on? Start with?

Craig Perryman 28:37

I think that there's some basic information that folks who are leading their congregation through discernment need to come to terms with they need to understand one of the things that that is very helpful in the in putting together a discernment process, is understanding what the predominant spiritual types of the people in your congregation are? How do they already best connect with God? what ways do they not connect very well with God? What is it that that touches them and moves them and helps them to experience God in the fullest possible way, right now? And then and which ways can they grow in their understanding and experiences of God? Knowing that helps us to understand the kinds of discernment processes to begin putting, there's a lot of work to do before you get to the actual discernment process. Okay. A lot of work to do as a matter of fact, in her book, Pursuing God's Will Together, Ruth Haley Barton says in the very beginning of that, and it's a lovely, it's a lovely book. It's not the it's not the the Bible of discernment, but it's a very good book. There are so many different ways of doing discernment, and this is Ruth Haley Barton's version. And in the very beginning of the book, she she says that the most important part of any discernment process is the preparation. If you don't do

all of the preparation necessary before you go into discernment, the chances of you actually being successful in discernment are pretty slim. However, if you go through all the necessary preparation, seriously giving yourself into the preparation of discernment, then it almost doesn't matter what the actual process of discernment is, you're probably going to be successful in discerning what God's calling you to in that moment. And I find that to be incredibly true. (Okay) Part of the reason for that, and understanding people's different spiritual predominant spiritual types is one element of that preparation. As far as I'm concerned, figuring out what kind of process we're eventually going to put together based on how people currently are connecting with God.

Blake Smith 31:04

So it's not just finding out your own spiritual type, but understanding the spiritual types of the people you are engaging in the discernment process with.

Craig Perryman 31:12

All of them individually, and collectively. And those are two very different things, right. So I think that and the church has wonderful resources, on understanding people's predominant spiritual types. So those are there are resources available for us to understand that understanding people's ministry skills, what skills they currently have, what things they currently feel called, to do, what kinds of ministries they're currently feeling called to do, those are important things. And then, having a basic understanding of certain spiritual principles and spiritual practices, is also incredibly important. But the primary thing is, in my mind, is the congregation coming to a joint understanding that the entire goal of this process isn't to figure out who's going to be pastor, it's for all of us, to become a people who are constantly seeking God, and wanting desperately to be in relationship with God. We look, we listen for God in the world around us, we look for God and the world around us, we are always seeking God. And we do that when we come together for business meetings, the idea of coming together for a business meeting, having a 60 second prayer do and then moving on to the actual reason that we've gathered together, and then closing with a 60 second benediction goes out the window, because everything we do becomes worship. Right, it all becomes a way of working together towards doing God's will everything. And in the midst of that entire meeting, we're still looking for and listening for God in what our colleagues are saying, and the things that are being proposed and, and trying to understand how the gifts that I bring to the table can be of use, and what my colleague is, is talking and telling me that they're experiencing God calling them to in that moment. So understanding that what we're doing is getting a congregation, however many people to sit down and say, the most important thing to us right now is that we become a group of people who are striving to grow in intimate relationship with God, and we're going to look for God, we're going to listen for God, always as much as possible. I don't know about you, I'm incredibly myopic. So for me, that's always a challenge. If, if I've got a to do list for the day, I'm focused on that to do list and it's always difficult for me to remind myself to be looking for and listening for God in all of those encounters that I'm going to have that day. And yet, that's what part of discernment is all about.

Blake Smith 34:01

That's great. So I want to really quick ask you, you mentioned Ruth Haley Barton's book and the preparation that needs to be done before you even begin the discernment process. Is those things that you mentioned, the spiritual types, the ministerial gifts, those kinds of things. Does she talk about that in

her book? I mean, if someone were saying, Okay, I'm trying to remember this process that Greg was talking about in this podcast. Where do I Where would I find that? Is there a...

Craig Perryman 34:33

Not directly, she doesn't talk about it directly. But the the world church has material that we put out that the church put out a number of years ago when we were talking about the different lenses for scripture study, and things along that there have been Yearning for God came out, which is a wonderful resource that Carolyn Brock put together a number of years ago. A lot of that material that came out then included things like discovering your spiritual type. Okay, Corinne Ware has a book that that does, I think, a fine job. It's an easy read about discovering your spiritual type. And it has a selector wheel exam that you can run your congregation through, that helps them understand what their predominant spiritual type is, and to understand what the congregation's predominant spiritual types are, and how those things may be measured, or don't message mesh. I think she does a really lovely job with that. And there are a number of different organizations out there that have different ministerial gifts assessments, that that we can we can access.

Blake Smith 35:41

So it sounds like kind of what's key is that we focus on engaging in some pieces that help us understand one another better.

Craig Perryman 35:50

Yes. And it's most successful with each person that becomes a part of it. You know, I'm not going to sit here and tell you that everybody has to be on board, because I don't know of any congregation where that's ever happened. Right? As a matter of fact, it's far from that, usually. But with every additional person that commits to that kind of a process, the the success of it, and the fullness of the experience grows enormously.

Blake Smith 36:20

From your experience with working with congregations in the process. Do you find it helpful that the group put together some type of covenant statement?

Craig Perryman 36:29

Yes, absolutely. As much as possible, as many ways as possible for the congregation to commit to being a part of that process. It's not a weekend process. You know, it's not it's it, like I said, it becomes a lifelong commitment to discernment. So it's, it's a challenge that we get people to commit to.

Blake Smith 36:50

So once you've kind of gone through this preparation process, you have spent a significant amount of time getting to know one another, are ready to covenant to move forward. How do you decide on what areas where do you focus? First, you look at issues that the congregation is struggling with, or questions that they have, where is it that you start?

Craig Perryman 37:13

So in my experience, normally I've you know, I've usually been pastor or the associate pastor of the congregation at the time. So I've had a fairly good idea of where the congregation currently was at spiritually. And where I was feeling called for the congregation to go, was where I was feeling, some hope or expectation of the congregation taking its next step forward. And then for me, the process has always been to sit back and say, so what are the roadblocks in us getting from point A to point B? What are the what are the different speed bumps that are occurring in the way that stopping that from automatically happening? Those become the key points that I choose to address? When I'm putting together a discernment process for any congregation, which is why that whole part is why discernment process and every congregation I've been in has been different.

Blake Smith 38:14

Okay. Yeah, that's helpful.

Craig Perryman 38:16

Knowing that, knowing that every congregation is different, where they're currently at spiritually, and where I'm feeling the call for them to go, and then what those different roadblocks are, that's keeping them from getting there as what makes every every single discernment process different.

Blake Smith 38:31

What might some of those roadblocks be? Just an example?

Craig Perryman 38:35

Yeah. So one roadblock in a couple of the congregations that I've I've been in is one that we've actually talked about a little bit already today. And that is that difference between belief and faith? Okay, a lot of the people in some of the congregations that I have been a part of going to church, for a lot of them is something that they've inherited. But a lot of our folks haven't necessarily claimed their own faith. That's an enormous roadblock. If you don't believe that God would have any reason to talk to you. You don't listen for it.

Blake Smith 39:10

What about recognizing that congregations can have a variety of foundational beliefs? That would seem to be a potential roadblock, if we're all starting from different assumptions in our beliefs.

Craig Perryman 39:22

It could be so one of those fundamental things that we need to come to terms with as congregations that we have to agree when we come together, that we love each other, that when you say something to me, Blake, even something that my ears might pick up as being hurtful, I call myself to remember that you really do love me. And so what you're saying to me, I choose to accept as coming out of that attitude of love. And what you're trying to do is to help me grow in my relationship with God and with Jesus Christ. And I pray that you have the same respect for me. And when you and I are talking, all I ever want is for you to be in deeper, more intimate relationship with God and with Jesus Christ. If we can actually get ourselves to come to that point, and that's not an easy task. (No, it's not) It's not. But if we can get ourselves to come to that point, then we can begin to have difficult discussions within our congregation, not only about the ology, but actually we might be able to have difficult discussions about

why we hide things from one another in our congregation. What kind of a loving church family feels, to put on masks and costumes outside in the parking lot before we come walking in the door. We can't be authentic with one another, but we're supposed to be the children of God, who are discerning together what God is calling us to when we're not even being authentic with each other. It doesn't work that way.

Blake Smith 41:00

That's really helpful advice in so many areas of our life, not just the discernment process. But I would agree, I think that, that the idea of building sacred community is essential to the discernment process to our work as the Body of Christ. And so a roadblock was (and mission) and mission.

Craig Perryman 41:19

Yeah, right. Imagine somebody coming into your congregation and being enveloped by a congregation that truly loves and respects one another. Who wouldn't want to be a part of that?

Blake Smith 41:29

Right. Right. And that requires that we be able to put away the mask, not that we just put them away, but that we can do it safely. (Yeah, yeah, exactly.) So the inability to remove the masks is a roadblock as well. That's, that's really helpful. I want to turn to the book, that you put together a guide book that I know you put together in the last congregation, tell us a little bit about the book, How to help a congregation through the process, what does that involve and include.

Craig Perryman 41:58

So the the book that I put together for the last congregation is based on a structure only, but based on a structure that that I've been a part of in a number of different congregations throughout the the years and when we look at the different roadblocks that we talked about, that are keeping us from getting from point A to point B, we take one of those roadblocks, for instance, my relationship with God and with Christ and with the Holy Spirit as a roadblock, I don't, I don't believe that they could want to love me. So we take that that feeling that we think is a roadblock in people moving forward. And we say what kinds of exercises can we put together that would help this person begin to come to an understanding of the depth of the love that God has for them. And so we might develop a theme for that week off of it. And that theme isn't just the theme that we put together in that workbook. But it becomes the theme for the entire week. So in what we did in in that last congregation was that we for that time period during that during that discernment journey that we put together... and it was a specific journey, but it wasn't the beginning and ending of discernment. I just want to be clear about that. But for that time period, we went off the Common Lectionary. And we built our own themes were for worship, and for Sunday school, and everything we did during that time period revolved around that theme. So we would come up with a the theme for the week, we came up with a predominant weekly scripture that we thought encompassed that whole thought process. And then every single day of that week, had its own scripture. It had some thoughts to think about regarding that scripture and the weekly scripture. And then there was a little activity and a prayer thought, for people to go through. So every day there was a different kind of an activity for people to do, that hopefully, gave them one more step towards coming to an understanding of the fact that God adores them in a way that they've never understood before. And we would be when we put that together, we're being mindful of the predominant spiritual types of the people gathered together. Sometimes we actually would talk about different some of the different

practices in discernment, for instance, saw silence and solitude, solitude and silence is a particular practice in which we just sit and we we try to just sit and be quiet and there's a number of different ways to go through that. You can go through centering prayer, you can go through so many different activities that bring you to that place and so we might, we might bring that into the the workbook in as a practice during that particular day to to listen For what God has to say to me today, and then, you know, God's been longing to talk to you, God's been longing for that relationship with you. Now, now let's let our guard down and be a part of that. And listen for that. And we can start hearing God wanting to be in relationship with us, which we had never heard before, because we couldn't imagine that God would want to. And so we would go through different steps, seven different steps during the course of that week to try to encompass that one thought process of God love. And I know, it's only one week, and it's only a baby step at the end of it, but there are different exercises to try to begin to overcome that thought process that you're not worthy of God wanting to be in relationship with you for that one. And then we move on to the next week, and the next theme and the next little roadblock that we had to overcome. And we did the same thing. We also then put together something that I think is critical to this process, which is small groups, a series of small groups, encouraging literally everyone in the congregation, man, woman and child to be involved in, in doing the workbook activities. So they're reading through the little scripture every single day, they're going through the activities every single day, there were family activities, for them to go through as as a family as well. And then coming together in a small group. Hopefully not including too many family members, but coming together in a small group to discuss what they were what they experienced during that particular week, how how did God interact with you in the midst of that week, and we had different study questions for them to go through during those small group discussions. Those were sacred spaces, the place where people get to where they believe that they can honestly say something to you, that they otherwise would have felt judged for. And now they've got somebody that they can share with. And, and the just the relationship that's built with that the unity that is built in the midst of that is so incredibly powerful and important to this entire process. Because it's a process of vulnerability. Discernment is a process of vulnerability, you you open yourself up and say to God, take me where you're going to take me.

Blake Smith 47:16

So I just want to recap all of the pieces that are incorporated in the book, but also in the process that all fit together, because I want to ask you a question off of that. So we've got a weekly devotional worship that is focused on spiritual practice. Then we have our corporate larger weekly worship that is also tied into the theme and depth away from the lectionary because we're going to focus in this area, there's a general weekly scripture that encapsulates the thought or the roadblock, if you will, that kind of addresses that question. There are daily Scriptures with thought provoking pieces that help think through that. There's family activities. There's small groups. (And Sunday school class). So a lot of pieces that are there are there are components that you would say, if you're going to have to trim this in any way, these would be the most essential pieces that you just really shouldn't sacrifice?

Craig Perryman 48:22

I mean, yes, and by the way, I will say to you that in every single congregation that I've been a part of, and I don't like I don't like the thought process of me leaving any of those congregations in discernment. I love the thought for me the thought process because I I'm just trying to figure it out. Right so it's it's not me trying to lead any congregation through it it's really me trying to journey with a congregation going

through that process. And when we're when we're really blessed God has taken us someplace. But in every single congregation that I've journeyed on discernment with every single time no matter what we have presented to the congregation leading up to it no matter how many times we said, this is really going to be a lot you know, this is going to take some serious effort on your part some time and energy on your part every single time they've come back and they've looked at me and they said, You never told us it was gonna be every single time

Blake Smith 49:25

ever I can I can vouch for the fact that you did in fact all the last congregation that information repeatedly, we we don't want to hear sometimes and then it's like, Oh, my goodness.

Craig Perryman 49:37

I guess I would say to you, yes. There are elements that that are more. Wow, which ones? Yeah. Man, the the small groups, like I said, I think are critical if Is it possible to do it without the small groups? Yes. And the reason I think that it's, the reason I know that it's possible is that in the last congregation that that we walked through it with, there were people that were joining us online because it was a hybrid situation that weren't part of any other congregation. And some of them chose not to join a small group and yet they went through the process. (Okay). I don't know that it that it's as meaningful or powerful or effective that way. I think that I think that folks that choose not to join the small groups miss a lot. I would say that it's one of the very most important parts of the process. For me, it's for me, it's a critical thing. But maybe that's just the way I engage God, I love talking with people about the way God's moving in their lives. So I guess I just, it's difficult for me to separate my own spiritual life and experiences from that I don't know that I can pick anything out that's not important.

Blake Smith 51:03

No, and I don't want to imply that there's anything that's not important. But I'm thinking if, if there were a group of folks who were interested and they said, We're going to start with this because we're really committed to it. What is the absolute most important and I would agree with you, I think that the small groups are very, very important that process because that's where we begin to build sacred community. And I know even as I say that there are people who are cringing and getting physically ill and wanting to leave the room. If I have to sit down in a small group and talk to people Oh, no. Yeah, that's, that's gonna be

Craig Perryman 51:39

It is frightening, but, but once again, that's discernments about vulnerability. And we have to, you know, Courage isn't the lack of fear. It's the willingness to go forward with that hesitation. And with that fear and, and still take the next step. And discernment is about being courageous enough to do that.

Blake Smith 52:02

You said something to me in a previous conversation that I think right now would be a good time to just get to, and that is...

Craig Perryman 52:10

that I look just like Brad Pitt.

Blake Smith 52:12

Yeah, that was what I was, what I was, it's been on my mind the whole time that I've been sitting here looking at you know, that the thing that that I want to bring up is the idea of being a success or a failure at discernment. And how do you know if you're successful?

Craig Perryman 52:32

Yeah. So there was, there was one congregation that I worked with not, I wasn't there through the whole process, but I chatted with them in the beginning about about discernment to talk to them about how they could put some things together. Because they, they really felt like they needed to come together as a congregation. They were fractured. They were, they were kind of having some very some difficulties of their own. And so we talked about what discernment in their in their group could look like. And they went through a discernment process. And as they were, as they were going through that process, they suddenly began to feel like they should close down the church that they were in and build a new church in a new location, which happened to be right across the street from a very large grade school. And so then, in the process of doing that, it also grew into a thought process that they were supposed to start a reading program for the children in the grade school across the street. Maybe that's why God was having us build across the street from the grade school. So they closed on their church, they built a new church across the street from from the grade school, and they began the reading program for the children across the street. And then they called me up after a, probably six months to a year after they'd started that program. And they said Craig, we're failing. They weren't getting the number of kids that they were hoping to get coming through. And and it just the numbers were dwindling. And they just felt like they had somehow or another they've completely missed what God was calling them to do. I started talking to them about this, this feeling that they had that they had failed. And I said, you know, I said what were the benchmarks that you put into place for your ministry? What did you determine had to happen for this ministry to be a success. And the the congregation started shouting things out, they shouted out, well, we wanted x number of children to be a part of the program. And, and we wanted the reading levels to go from A to B, you know, to go to go up X amount X percentage points. And some of them said, Well, we it would be a success if the families of the kids that were part of the reading program, started attending the church or at least have some of the family started attending the church that would be a success. And, and I listened to them and I could hear the pain in their voice and I said to them man, those are great goals. goals are wonderful goals. They shouldn't have been the benchmarks for what's the success in this ministry? I said the second you made those things your benchmarks, you assumed that you knew not only what God was calling you to, but why God was calling you to do those things. You decided in your own head, that God wanted their reading levels to go up, and so He called you here to do that you you decided that God wanted those kids families to start attending your congregation, and that's why you did the ministry. But what if those weren't God's motivations? What if God didn't give a flip about whether or not those families attended your congregation or the kids reading levels went up? What if that's not why God did it? What if God asked you to do that because across the street at that school, there's a little girl named Susie. And Susie grew up longing for affection that was never going to come to her. Suddenly, this little church pops up across the street, and they start a reading program. So they send Susie over to the reading program across the street, and Susie sits down with Sarah, an 80 year old woman from the congregation who volunteered to help teach Susie how to read. And the first day that they meet Sarah

goes up and shakes Susie's hand and says, Hi, Susie, how are you today? What kind of things do you like kind of books do you like to read Susie doesn't know she didn't know how to read? What kind of stories do you like Susie. And Susie starts telling her about the stories that she likes. And Sarah takes her over and starts finding a book that she thinks Susie would like. And they sit down to read but Susie can't read. So Sarah takes her time. And she slowly starts trying to get Susie to sound out the different letters and learn how to read. And she's so patient with Susie. But but it's not just the reading because every time Susie shows up Sarah smiling, and she calls her over and they talk about Susie's week and what good things happened and what bad things happened and, and Sarah's always comforting Susie in the midst of that. And not long after they start this. When Susie shows up, Sarah's got her arms open wide and Susie comes running up and they start hugging. And they get and Susie is getting attention and she's getting she's getting love and she's getting adoration and somewhere along the line, a little glimmer strikes into the depth of who Susie is. And for the first time in her life. She begins to think that maybe she could be loved. And I looked at the congregation and I said, does that sound like something your god would ask you to do to close down your one church and build another church and start a reading program only for the purpose of making sure Susie knew that she was loved. And they all said yes. I said, maybe it wasn't about Susie. Maybe it was always about Sarah. Maybe the problem that God was trying to solve was the fact that Sarah is 80 years old, and somehow or another had convinced herself that she didn't have anything left to give. That her time was up that she was useless now. And God needed to show Sarah, that in his hands, she can move mountains. She can change lives. The point of the entire message was we can't determine why God is asking us to do the things that we that we truly discern God's asking us to do. The question I asked the congregation was, did you truly believe that God called you to sell the one church build a new church and started reading program? And they said yes. I said, Did you pursue it with everything you were? And they said, Yes. I said, then you succeeded. Period. That needs to be the bar, the only bar that we put up when it comes to discernment. Do we hear God calling something to us? Do we hear God talking to us? And do we pursue what God asks us to do or who God asks us to become with everything we are? If we can say yes to that. We've succeeded.

Blake Smith 59:28

That is a great way to wrap up. We could probably spend hours and hours talking about this, because I'm a Seventy, you're a Seventy. We are two Seventies who are passionate about these kinds of things. And so it's just been really great to sit and talk with you. I want to ask you just two more things. One, if you could share one piece of advice with a congregation considering discernment. What would it be?

Craig Perryman 59:56

in all sincerity, the response that I think that I will would have to that is move from belief to faith. Okay trust that God adores you, and only wants what's best for you?

Blake Smith 1:00:13

Is there anything that I haven't asked that you wanted to share about racial sermon, anything that you would add?

Craig Perryman 1:00:18

I think I think the thing that I would add is simply this. Since the very goal of discernment is to grow in deeper and more intimate relationship with God, I don't understand why we're not all involved in in discernment on a regular basis. And once we enter fully enter into discernment, and we make ourselves vulnerable, and we truly covenant with God, to listen for God to be to be awake to the movement of that Holy Spirit and to respond to God, when with whatever God says, And God chooses to touch us, chooses to engage with us, chooses to talk with us chooses to work through us, our lives are changed in ways that I can't even begin to explain.

Blake Smith 1:01:09

Well, Craig, I can't thank you enough for taking the time to sit down and talk with me about this. It was, of course a joy to join you in this process at one of the congregations but I really appreciate you taking the time, I know that your schedule is crazy busy. I also want to say thank you to our listeners for taking the time to be here today for this episode of What's Brewing. I hope and pray that you got a sense of the energy and the passion that has been shared here, and just encourage you to give discernment a chance. All right. Well, with that we say thanks again. And we hope you'll join us for other podcasts with the Project Zion Podcast. Have a great rest of your day.