

Slow Wisdom is based on qualitative research with four Baptist churches in London through a University of Chester research project undertaken by Rev. Dr Ruth Moriarty.

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Discernment in the Baptist Church

Ruth Moriarty

Slow wisdom is one way that Baptists can discern the mind of Christ together at the Church Meeting. There are six marks of slow wisdom: slowness, prayer, consensus agreement, listening, hearing and prophetic participation.

Imagine a slow cooker, it turns simple ingredients into a tasty meal because the flavours are able to develop through time. In a similar way, slow wisdom allows each mark to guide discernment. To discern well, each mark of slow wisdom will be present at some stage of discernment.



Biblical basis for Slow Wisdom

Baptists discern together by honouring each other as members of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12.4-27) and gathering together to encounter presence of Christ (Matthew 18.20), as members of the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2.5) and as recipients of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.1-18) to seek the mind of Christ.

1 Slow

Baptist discernment is slow. A typical Church Meeting lasts between 45 minutes - 2 hours, and most churches meet between 4-6 times a year. Discernment has a slow pattern for significant items to discern. For example, this might be how a church discerns selling property:

Meeting 1 – share idea and pray

Meeting 2 – discuss and pray

Meeting 3 – consider external advice

Meeting 4 – consider proposal and refine proposal

Meeting 5 – pray and make a final decision

The risk of rejection of an idea decreases if it is introduced gradually. Discernment at the Church Meeting enables members of the church to consider what God might be saying to a congregation.

2 Prayer

Prayer is key to slow wisdom. Different patterns of prayer contribute to discernment: open prayer, intercessory prayer, prayer as a permeating presence of the Spirit and prayer as a tool for testing in discernment.

Open prayer

Free prayer in worship is an expression of our history as a persecuted church and a Baptist theological belief in the gathered church including the Church Meeting.

Intercessory prayer for members

The presence of intercessory prayer at the Church Meeting indicates a Practical Theology of care for members as an expression of slow wisdom. Praying for each other is part of being member of a Baptist church (see membership vows in *Gathering for Worship*, 2005).

3 Consensus

Slow wisdom seeks a form of consensus as a mark of discernment. Consensus can mean different things in each Baptist church. It can mean general agreement on decisions, complete agreement, or using Consensus Decision Making small group work to reach an agreed decision (Eichler, 2007). Using small group work – of any kind – helps churches reach consensus agreement.

4 Listening

As members of the body of Christ gathered in a particular place, we need to receive and honour the contributions of each member of the body.

‘I’ve tried to talk about the essence of a Church Meeting as being about the responsibility to listen rather than the right to speak’
(Matthew, Baptist minister).

To be receptive to the ideas of others is a necessary expression of the ecclesiology of the Baptist church’s understanding that members are the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12.27).

5 Hearing

To make a decision, Baptists discern by being attentive to dissenting and different voices. The Church Meeting provides a place for members to hear and be attentive to each other’s point of view and emotions as an inclusive participatory decision-making practice.

6 Prophetic participation

Prophetic contributions at the Church Meeting typically come from shy members, or members that do not normally speak but feel powerfully led by the Spirit. The Church Meeting offers a radical possibility of prophetic knowledge from any member of the body of Christ.

When you are discerning, have you seen each mark as part of your process to seek the mind of Christ together?