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Video 1: Experience of discernment and the Church Meeting - <https://youtu.be/gSHt2D7kbVQ>

Slow wisdom book: see chapter 1&2 for more detail

Discerning the mind of Christ from 1 Corinthians 2.14-16:

¹⁴The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. ¹⁵The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, ¹⁶ for, “Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

This research:

- 1/ Identifies barriers to attendance and participation at the Church Meeting,
- 2/ Explores the theology and tradition of discernment for Baptists
- 3/ Provides a new language for Baptist discernment: ‘Slow wisdom’
- 4/ Identifies discernment as embodied Christian practical wisdom
- 5/ Analyses best practice to increase participation at the Church Meeting

Low attendance is often caused by historic conflict and observed among younger members, members from different denominational backgrounds and Black and Brown members.

- Younger members attend less (Brierley, 2017) but are more devout (Perrin, 2016).
- Practical changes to timing and format increased attendance at Gates Baptist.

- Members from different denominational backgrounds are present (Dougherty, Marti & Martinez, 2015).
- Sharing slow wisdom model will grow knowledge.

- Black and Brown members are seen as too different and can experience racism.
- Preferences in speech and theology need to be addressed to increase belonging (Jennings, 2020).

QUESTION: What is your experience of discernment at the Church Meeting?

Video 2: Biblical principles and history of the Church Meeting - https://youtu.be/F54bORADm_k
Slow wisdom book: see chapter 3 for more detail

‘This’ : local gathered church by Christ (Matthew 18) and Spirit (Acts 2) for mission.

‘Body’ : each member is part of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12.4-27)

‘Life’ : the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2.4-5).

Persecution

- Early Baptists were persecuted by the state for asking for religious freedom.

Church as body

- Early Baptists met for worship and discernment together to be holy witnesses as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12.4-27) in the community (Haymes, Gouldbourne, Cross, 2008).
- In the 1700s Baptist churches were rural, small and poor. (Gill, 2003; Egner, 2008).
- By 1840 Baptist churches growing in numbers and wealth in cities.
- The Church Meeting remains a spiritual act.

Church as priesthood of all believers

- London 1644 confession of faith: ‘All beleevers are a holy and sanctified people, | and that sanctification is a spirituall grace of the new | Covenant ...’ (reproduced Lumpkin, 1959).

Biblical basis for priesthood of all believers

- Exodus 19.5-6: Israel as both a priestly kingdom and a holy nation
- 1 Peter 2.4-5: Christians are made into a holy priesthood
- Revelation 5.9-15: Every nation to be kingdom of priests (Newman, 2005)

Link to covenant theology from Gainsborough church (1608) statement:

- Members ‘joynd them selves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a Church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel, to walke in all his ways, made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them’ (Fiddes, 2006).

Modern membership vows reflect these principles

- Will you, as the members of (this church) promise to share your lives and journey of faith with A, walking together in ways that are known and yet to be made known?
We will. (Gathering for Worship, 2005).

QUESTION: How does ‘this body life’ relate to Baptist church life for you?

Video 3: Slow wisdom – six marks of discernment - <https://youtu.be/u1Mr61cfxCA>

Slow wisdom book: see chapter 4 & 5 for more detail

1/ Slow

- Slow wisdom is slow due to the pattern of raising agenda items, up to six months for significant decisions. It is valuable to take time to hold a congregation together in discernment.

2/ Prayer

- Free prayer is formative for Baptists following persecution for rejecting the Book of Common Prayer in 1662 (Ellis, 2004).
- Intercessory prayer for members indicates the covenantal nature of Church Meeting.

3/ Consensus

- This term was used in different ways in different churches:
 1. As expression of agreement that was actively sought and tested
 2. General agreement on decisions
 3. Consensus decision making in small group work (Eichler, 2007)

4/ Listening

- '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, Jarman Baptist)
- 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.

5/ Hearing

- To make a decision, Baptists discern by being attentive to dissenting and different voices.
- Being attentive to each other's point of view and emotions enables inclusive participatory decision-making practice.

6/ Prophetic participation

- Prophetic contributions often come from unexpected members.
- They are recognised by a member 'talking sense ... they spoke God's words into the situation ... they just spoke from the heart' (Matthew, Jarman Baptist).
- A comparison is found in seeking knowledge in education by theologian bell hooks' (2010): '[There are] students who may not speak often but when they speak the significance of what they have to say far exceeds those of other students who may always openly discuss ideas'.

QUESTION: How have you seen the six marks of slow wisdom at the Church Meeting?

Video 4: Discernment as embodied Christian practical wisdom - https://youtu.be/L6II8U_KSgQ

Slow wisdom book: see chapter 4 for more detail

- Feeling and discernment create a Baptist divine gut; embodied Christian practical wisdom.
- The divine gut is both an index of the presence of Christ and a recognition of the Spirit's movement.
- Wisdom = *Phronesis* in Matthew 7.24, we wisely build on Christ.
- Embodied wisdom = knowledge 'where the body itself knows how to act' (Tanaka, 2011)
- Baptist bodies participate at the Church Meeting and dis-member when other members of the body are poorly treated.
- bell hooks (2010): Practical wisdom helps us to remember that ideas are not fixed and static but always subject to change.
- Baptists are open to the new, Spirit always transforming and renewing (John 3.8).

QUESTION: In what ways might the Baptist divine gut help us to discern the mind of Christ?

Video 5: Ways forward for discernment in the Baptist church - <https://youtu.be/IeBANJ9AAa8>

Slow wisdom book: see chapter 6&7 for more detail

- *Recommendation 1:* Consider regular preaching on the biblical models of the body of Christ and the priesthood of all believers. Consider exploring Baptist history and teaching about covenantal role of church members.
- *Recommendation 2:* Think about how you might share the slow wisdom model of discernment to help members from different denominational backgrounds especially to participate.
- *Recommendation 3:* Consider the practical arrangements of your church meeting. Does the timing of your church meeting to help the most members attend? Would offering childcare to help parents attend?
- *Recommendation 4:* Try small groups to disrupt power balance and hear the Spirit speak from all members.
- *Recommendation 5:* Consider the agenda items from your meeting, are they strategic or missional?

QUESTION: How could the recommendations of this research work in your context?

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