



# Pneumatological communal discernment and a possibility of including unheard voices in decision-making

Mookgo Solomon Kgatle

Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History, and Missiology

School of Humanities, University of South Africa

Pretoria, South Africa

[kgatls@unisa.ac.za](mailto:kgatls@unisa.ac.za)

Orcid ID <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9556-6597>



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## Abstract

Communal discernment is the idea of involving the group in decision-making as opposed to decisions by individuals. Previous studies worked within the ecclesiological perspectives and highlighted the key principles of communal discernment such as the communion of believers, the communal reading of scripture, the communal discernments of spirit(s), and the common commitment to carrying out the decision reached through communal discernment. This article proposes a pneumatological discernment based on the encounter with the Spirit, the hermeneutical Spirit, and the Holy Spirit discernment. The pneumatological discernment is relevant for the communion of spirit-filled believers, the communal reading of scripture, the discernment of spirits, and taking common decisions. The main aim of this article is to demonstrate that pneumatological communal discernment has a possibility of including those who are in the margins including women and children when it comes to making decisions. There are key principles that make this possible. First, the Spirit has been poured upon all flesh including the women and the children. Second, the hermeneutical Spirit responsible for the illumination of scriptures also lives upon those in the margins. Lastly, the task of discerning between the Holy Spirit and the evil spirits is not only reserved for the elite but also for those who are in the margin. Therefore, communal discernment should not only be understood from an ecclesiological point of view but also as a pneumatological phenomenon.

**Keywords:** Pneumatological imagination; Pentecostalism; Hermeneutical Spirit; pneumatological communal discernment.

## Introduction

It was the Augustine of Hippo, also known as Saint Augustine, a theologian, and philosopher who said, "Suspicion will always arise when someone speaks on his account". If we agree with Augustine, it implies that affirmation comes when someone speaks in the witness of others communally. This makes common discernment is important than a discernment by an individual. Communal discernment as explained in the works of Futrell (1972), Barton (2012), and De Villiers (2013) becomes an approach based on the group rather than an approach to discernment that is too individualized. This group works to find common ground to serve God in unison. Futrell (1972:160) explains that "Communal spiritual discernment is the effort of an entire faith community to find God and, therefore, to find his actual word here and now to the whole community, to which the whole community as one is called to say "Yes, Father" with one voice". Barton (2012:13) explains that the individuals become part of the group to contribute towards the discernment of a community. Hence, Barton (2012) calls communal discernment a communal pursuit for the will of God upon the believers. De Villiers (2013:132)

explains that initially small groups can work separately but at the end, they bring their deliberations to the main group for a complete discernment. De Villiers (2013:132) continues to say that communal discernment “is approached from the assumption that it concerns the rational and contemplative gaze of a community of faith which is at work in understanding the way of God”. The important research question for this current study is how exactly can people converge from diverse backgrounds to serve God together. Which communal discernment is relevant for the inclusion of those who are at the margins in the decision-making?

While common discernment has been studied in the past to demonstrate the value of communion of believers as opposed to individualised discernment, there is a need to point to the agency of such communion. Hence, a proposal for pneumatological discernment is needed to demonstrate the agency of the Holy Spirit in communal discernment. In other words, it will be argued in the current study that it is the Holy Spirit that makes it possible for believers to converge and discern together. It will also be argued that this kind of discernment is relevant for the inclusion of those who are on the margins. To sustain this argument, I have divided this article into five main sections to demonstrate the relevance of Pneumatological discernment in common discernment. In the first section, I am going to review the literature on communal discernment by looking at key sources on this conceptual framework. The second section introduces pneumatological discernment by reflecting on the role of the Holy Spirit in discernment. The third section expands on the role of pneumatological discernment in communal discernment to make a Pentecostal contribution. The fourth section will demonstrate how pneumatological communal discernment is relevant for the inclusion of those who are at the margins when it comes to decision-making. In the last section, I will highlight the necessity of studying communal discernment beyond the ecclesiological framework to include a pneumatological perspective.

### **Communal discernment: a literature review**

One of the proponents if not a leading scholar on communal discernment, John Carroll Futrell (1972: 167) highlighted the prerequisites of communal discernment which are communion of believers, communal hermeneutics, communal discernment of spirit(s), and communal decision-making. I want to discuss these four requisites in the quest to understand communal discernment. The first principle of communal discernment is the communion of believers or fellowship of believers which Futrell (1972:168) highlighted the importance of having common interests or shared interests for this kind of communion to take place. Futrell (1972) is of the idea that communal discernment can only take place if the differences that may arise among believers have been eliminated. The communal discernment is also discussed by other scholars such as De Villiers (2013:134), Gaillardetz (2003:142), and Moses (2015:147). Therefore, the communion of believers includes but is not limited to table fellowship or even holy communion. Gaillardetz (2003:9) points out that already in 1985, Pope John Paul highlighted the communion of believers as a fundamental issue in communal discernment and ordered that it be prioritized in the next Vatican council.

Gaillardetz (2003:9) continues to highlight the importance of communion by pointing to it as an essence of the existence of the church described as the ecclesiology of communion. In other words, God instituted the church as a platform for any person to have fellowship with others. In this way, the church is not defined as a building but rather as a place of communion or fellowship of believers. Moses (2015:148) also has an ecclesiological understanding of communion as speaks of an Anglican communion that seeks to unite the local assemblies and dioceses. This is the crux of the ecclesiology of communion. De Villiers (2013:134) points out that “Peter thus does not discern God’s will on his own, but only after discussion and in communion with Cornelius, after hearing of Cornelius’s vision and reflecting on it in the light of prophetic tradition (Act 10:43)”. This means that communion is working with others for the discernment of the will of God upon an individual. The contribution I want to make in this current study is that the Holy Spirit would have played a role in necessitating the communion of leaders

such as Peter and Cornelius in the discernment of the will of God. I will therefore demonstrate later that the communion of believers is not only ecclesiological but also pneumatological.

The second principle of communal discernment is the communal reading of scripture. The communal reading of scripture calls out a witness to confirm the word that is being ministered as the biblical text in 2 Corinthians 13:1 states, “By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established.” This is also supported by 2 Timothy 3:16 “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness”. Therefore previous studies on communal reading of scripture have also expressed the reading of the biblical text in the same way, that is reading the text to establish a doctrine (Pinnock, 2002, East, 2021, Kugel, 1998, Verhey, 2005). Pinnock (2002:37) highlights the fact that the church owes its allegiance to the teachings of scripture. East (2021:14) mentions three important factors in this process that is the text itself, the community, and the readers. Verhey (2005:297) mentions the “reading of scripture according to the creed, according to the “Rule of Faith,” for the creed is simply the abridged version of the story scripture tells, the “short story” of the canon”. Kugel (1998:8) concurs that the communal reading of scripture is concerned with the “obedience of biblical laws”. Therefore scripture in that context is read to fulfil certain laws of a particular community. This calls for a different communal reading of scripture, we need to seek a possibility where scripture is not only read to establish doctrine but also as an illumination by the Holy Spirit. There is a need for the reading and interpretation of scripture beyond the doctrinal understanding. I, therefore, seek to demonstrate that the communal reading of scripture can be done beyond the approach to scripture as an establishment of doctrine. Therefore, we need to be open to a possibility whereby the communal reading of scripture is not bound to the doctrinal issues but the revelation as per the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This possibility that the biblical text can speak more than what the real authors have communicated in scripture.

The third principle of communal discernment is the discernment of spirit(s). It is for the same reason that Futrell (1972:166) instead of talking generally of the communal discernment has coined “communal spiritual discernment” in articulating the discernment of spirit(s) in the broader scope of communal discernment. Other scholars such as Lienhard (1980), Gallagher (2018), and Karkkainen (2019) have reflected on communal discernment as discernment of spirit(s). Lienhard (1980:509) points out that the discernment of spirits is a tool to distinguish between clean and unclean spirits. Leinhard (1980:510) continues to say that “discernment of spirits was a gift whereby a Christian could identify the kind of spirit that spoke through a man (soothsayer, prophet or deceiver—i.e., false prophet) and also distinguish different kinds of persons, those who are spiritual from those who are not”. Gallagher (2018:19) raises the point that the discernment of spirits cannot only be delegated to the work of grace or salvation. This means that discernment of spirits demands another agency for the believer to be able to distinguish between spirits. The importance of community within the discernment of spirits assists in dealing with some of the difficulties of discernment among a specific group (2019:173). While it is important to distinguish between spirits, I want to point out the agency of the Holy Spirit as one enabling the believer and community to be able to make distinctions between spirit(s). This opens up the possibility of including the Holy Spirit in the distinction of spirits, meaning the Holy Spirit is one of the spirit(s) that require distinctions.

The last principle is the common commitment to carrying out the decision reached through communal discernment (Anderson, 2006; Prechtel, 2002; Okoye, 2023). This involves the commitment of each member in the common discernment as part of decision-makers. Anderson (2006:39) explains that “individual leaders, biblical convictions, historical/theological understandings, and intellectual reflections come together to be confirmed or amended within the setting of corporate discernment”. This is because, in the Christian tradition, decisions are not only made by considering the interests of church leaders or even church members but also the aspect of discernment (Prechtel, 2002:3). This according to Futrell (1972:166) involves the community of believers agreeing and eliminating any form of disagreements to make unified

decisions. Therefore, there is a need in decision-making for the leaders to consult their followers as a process of discerning correct decisions in the church (Okoye, 2023:2). However, while so many scholars such as those highlighted above have raised the importance of communal discernment including consulting followers in decision-making, the research gap exists in the composition of such decision-making bodies in the community or a church. Therefore, my thinking here is the discussion of the role of communal discernment in including those who are at the margins when it comes to communal discernment. Therefore, we need to explore the possibility of including women, children, and anyone in the margins when decisions are made at an ecclesial level through the empowerment of the Spirit. This is the possibility of communal discernment transcending the ecclesiological boundaries to include pneumatological aspects. In the next section, I discuss the role of pneumatological imagination in discernment.

### **Pneumatological imagination in discernment**

Pneumatological imagination is a framework coined by Lucien Richard but made popular by Amos Yong when he suggested its grounding in the orientation to God, humanity, and creation (Yong, 2014, 2019, 2020). Three principles form part of the theoretical underpinnings for the pneumatological imagination: the Spirit encounter, the sensory encounter, and the creation encounter (Yong, 2020). I want to pick up on the first encounter to apply the pneumatological imagination to discernment. According to Yong (2020:155), the pneumatological imagination is developed firstly on the personal encounter with the Holy Spirit. As it happened on the day of the Pentecost the believers had an encounter with the divine through an encounter with the Holy Spirit. Communal discernment, therefore can be enhanced through the recognition of an individual encounter with the Holy Spirit through Spirit baptism as it happened on the day of the Pentecost.

Pentecostals believe that such an experience is not only limited to the early church but extends to other generations of believers including in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, the contribution here is the recognition of Spirit encounters in the discernment as informed by the convergence of believers who are spirit-filled within the communal discernment. When the believers fellowship together, it creates an opportunity for the communal reading for the fellowship with the Holy Spirit and scripture reading. Therefore, discernment owes its orientation to God through an encounter with the Holy Spirit. This should be a priority before we talk about an orientation to fellow human beings in a communal way. Therefore, the discernment that is inspired by the Holy Spirit is not just the work of human beings but rather the work of the divine. We should also be cognizant of the fact that it is the Holy Spirit in the Pentecostal narrative in Lukan acts who made it possible for people of different backgrounds to gather together and communally understand each other. Similarly, in contemporary Pentecostalism in Revivals such as Azusa Street Revival the encounter with the Holy Spirit made it possible for people of different backgrounds to converge communally (Creech, 1996; Anderson, 2006 & Robeck, 2006). Thus, it can be concluded that communal discernment starts with encounters with the Holy Spirit.

Second, the same Holy Spirit in Spirit encounters of the pneumatological imagination inspire the believer in the reading and understanding of the biblical text, hence, Yong (2017) in his other work refers to the Holy Spirit as a hermeneutical Spirit. Yong (2017:7) explains that the hermeneutical Spirit is the framework where

The activity of the Spirit is largely a perlocutionary force, achieving the divinely intended effects of the scriptural locutions in the lives of believers. Thus the Holy Spirit is tied to Scripture, enables believers to receive and comprehend the scriptural word, convicts them of Scripture's message, sanctifies their attitudes to the biblical witness, and illuminates the letter of the text.

Therefore, the hermeneutical Spirit in the context of pneumatological imagination is relevant for the understanding of the biblical text of an individual. However, I also want to point out that since the Holy Spirit lives among believers, it is also possible for believers to be able to understand the Bible normally since they have all been filled with the same hermeneutical Spirit. Therefore, before we talk about communal reading of the text, there is a necessity to talk about the recognition of the Holy Spirit in the believer to read and understand the text. When this is established, it is then easier for the communal reading of the biblical text to take place in communal discernment. However, Yong (2020) is not the first to recognise the importance of the Holy Spirit in hermeneutics and its relation to discernment. It was Ignatius Loyola (1991) who also suggested the reading of the text with the help of the Holy Spirit as a tool of discernment. In this way, the biblical text is not just an ancient book that establishes believers in church laws and doctrine but rather a revelation of the Holy Spirit. The works of Archer (2004), Martin (2013), and Nel (2015) also demonstrate that Pentecostals read the Bible as informed by their experiences with the Holy Spirit which is also known as the hermeneutics of experience. This is important in the understanding of the Pentecostal pneumatological discernment.

Lastly, it is through the same encounter with the Holy Spirit that discernment of other spirits begins to take place in the life of the believer and the community. Pentecostalism is not ignorant of the existence of other spirits in the spirit realm but acknowledges the Holy Spirit as the great power over other spirits. Pneumatological imagination in discernment is relevant in the recognition of the role of the Holy Spirit in discernment, this means that the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer is the one who discerns other spirits. When a believer has been filled with the Holy Spirit, they will be able to discern between clean and unclean spirits. We cannot be ignorant of the fact that discernment of spirits is the gift of the Holy Spirit. 1 John 4:1-3 states:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

According to this text, the discernment of spirits is encouraged to identify between spirits but also to be able to distinguish between true and false prophets. However, the text is also clear in highlighting the role of the Holy Spirit in making these distinctions including the identification of the anti-Christ. Therefore, the Holy Spirit plays a pivotal role in the discernment of spirits which is an important aspect of communal discernment. In the next section, a pneumatological communal discernment is developed as a Pentecostal contribution.

### **Pneumatological communal discernment: a Pentecostal contribution**

The pneumatological communal discernment is relevant for the communion of spirit-filled believers. Gaillardetz (2003:) says "It is the Spirit that transformed the church of Pentecost from an aggregate group of individuals into a spiritual communion". The role of the Holy Spirit as the driver of the Pentecostal transformation among the spirit-filled believers has also been raised by Markin (2019). The Holy Spirit becomes that agent that makes the communion of believers possible since spirit-filled believers share a common purpose. Similarly, on the day of Pentecost, they were all gathered together awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit. Most importantly, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon all believers made it possible for the communion of believers to take place beyond Pentecost. Moreover, this extended the ecclesiological framework as these spirit-filled believers began to meet one another beyond the church fellowship. In other words, it is the work of the Holy Spirit that made it possible for the believers to meet even in their houses and in the public square. The same is the rationale for the expansion of the Pentecostal movement. In other words, Pentecostals given their

embracement of the Pentecostal theology of the Spirit can meet outside the parameters of the church as an organisation or even the church building. This is possible because of the pneumatological element in communal discernment. Therefore, a communal discernment in the Pentecostal tradition is not about the formal convergence of the local assemblies of dioceses but simply the gathering of the Spirit-filled believers. Because Pentecostals encourage that all the believers be filled with the Holy Spirit. It is on this basis, that it is assumed that Pentecostal gatherings involve Spirit-filled believers. The common factor in the Pneumatological communal discernment is the infilling of the Holy Spirit. This also explains the rationale for the influence of the Pentecostal movement in missions and world Christianity. Furthermore, it is important to point out that Pentecostals do not only commune together, they also work together.

The pneumatological communal discernment is relevant for the communal reading of scripture. This view is supported by Cartledge (2020:163) who says that “readings of the biblical texts tend to be more pneumatologically orientated”. This means that the Holy Spirit is involved in the biblical text interpretation. So there are clear connection as Yong (2017) puts it between the pneumatology (theology of the Spirit) and the understanding of the biblical text. Vondey (2024:464) reiterates the point that in the Pentecostal tradition, “the foundational exercise of communal discernment is based on a prior act of discerning the authority and meaning of the biblical texts”.

The point I am making in this current study is that the same pneumatological orientation is responsible for the communal reading and understanding of the biblical texts. In addition, the Holy Spirit is also able to lead one believer into the hermeneutical understanding for the next believer. Hence, Pentecostals around the world are known for conducting bible study together where it is believed that the Holy Spirit is pivotal for the illumination among the believers. Therefore within the framework of pneumatological communal discernment, we should not only define Pentecostals as a reading community but rather as a community that helps each other understand the bible in a better way because they have been filled with the Holy Spirit. This is what happened in the encounter between Cornelius and the Ethiopian Eunuch, because Phillip was spirit-filled he was then able to interpret the scriptures to the Eunuch who read without revelation. Therefore, the ultimate purpose of the Pentecostal communal reading amongst Pentecostal believers is not just the reading of the text as a historical book but to receive revelation as per the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This is the value of the pneumatological imagination in communal discernment because scripture is not read generally but about the revelation of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostals are of firm belief that as they read the biblical text together the Holy Spirit would bring them to relevant texts where they will be able to deal with adverse situations.

The pneumatological communal discernment is relevant for the discernment of spirits. In the Pentecostal tradition, the Holy Spirit is an intercessory Spirit that prays in the believer where the discernment of spirits also takes place. However, the contribution of this current study is that the pneumatological communal discernment takes place in the discernment of spirits as well. Kärkkäinen (2024) points out that such a role of the Holy Spirit does not only happen in the individual but also the communal discernment. In this way, pneumatological communal discernment does not only help in the gathering of the saints and the reading of scripture but most importantly to discern spirits. And this is not limited to discerning evil spirits, through the same pneumatological communal discernment, Pentecostals can also discern the presence of the Holy Spirit among one another.

As pointed out in the preceding section, the Holy Spirit is also the subject of discernment when believers seek to distinguish between the Holy Spirit and other spirits. However, my point is that ordinarily human beings would not on their own be able to distinguish between spirits, it is only possible through the help of the Holy Spirit. Another important aspect of it is that the discernment of spirits, like the communion of believers and reading of scriptures, is not limited

to the ecclesiological framework but can also happen in the public square or during family meetings or what Pentecostals call cell group meetings. It is the revelation and the power of the Holy Spirit that enables Pentecostals to move beyond the ecclesiological understanding of discernment towards the spirited or rather the pneumatological understanding of discernment. Therefore, the discernment of spirits and the discernment of the Holy Spirit is not only ecclesiological but also pneumatological. In the next section, I explore the role of pneumatological communal discernment and its possibility of including unheard voices, that is, the voices from the margins.

### **Pneumatological Communal discernment: a Possibility of including unheard voices.**

Decision-making in communal discernment at times is done to the exclusion of those who are in the margins including women, youth, children, and the poor. Sanders (2009) explains in some of the churches those in the margins would be categorised in groups to exclude them from the main spiritual service. This also speaks for example to the lack of representation when it comes to the women who are supposed to serve in the leadership positions. In an empirical research that Deborah Rhode (2016) conducted, she demonstrated the lack of representation of women in high echelons of power when compared with their male counterparts. This is surprising since women make up a large percentage of the many churches's membership. In some churches, people would receive positions because they are rich or because of their vicinity to the pastor. The pneumatological communal discernment opens up the possibility of including the unheard voices in decision-making including women, the poor, children, and the youth. The key principle making this a possibility is that the Spirit has been poured upon all flesh including the women, the children, the youth, and the poor. Since pneumatological communal discernment is based on the Holy Spirit, it practically means that anyone who is baptized in the Holy Spirit can become part of the decision-making body within the church.

Anyone who is filled with the Holy Spirit can commune with other believers, read the biblical text together, and make decisions with others. This is what the early church used to do as a result of being filled with the Holy Spirit. In Joel 2:28 It is stated very well that "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. This means that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in which we get the pneumatological communal discernment is for everyone including those who are in the margins. Acts 2:38-39 also states "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call." Therefore, a pneumatological communal discernment is open to everyone including children. This is an important contribution to ordinary communal discernment because decision-making here is not only reserved for the elites but everyone who has been filled by the Holy Spirit.

### **Communal discernment: transcending ecclesiological framework.**

Previous studies have explored communal discernment from an ecclesiological perspective meaning about the church and its governance. However, as discussed in the preceding section, pneumatological communal discernment enables the gathering of Spirit-filled believers beyond the ecclesiastical settings as some believers in the early church gathered in their homes and the public square. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Pentecostal movement particularly in the global south is known for meetings outside the limitations of a church building. In addition, the pneumatological communal discernment demonstrates that the reading of the biblical text exceeds its understanding and interpretation for establishing church doctrines. Pentecostals read the biblical texts together for illumination as inspired by the Holy Spirit. In this way, the reading of the biblical text is beyond the church doctrinal understanding which also means it is beyond the ecclesiological understanding into the pneumatological revelatory understanding. Furthermore, the pneumatological communal discernment discerns the spirits as informed by



the baptism of the Holy Spirit, not as a church doctrine. Therefore, communal discernment should not only be understood from an ecclesiological point of view but also as a pneumatological phenomenon. This is a possibility of us perceiving the communal discernment beyond the ecclesial communion and ecclesial doctrinal hermeneutics. But rather the idea of different believers coming together to pursue the will of God as driven by the Holy Spirit. This makes the pneumatological communal discernment very ecumenical by encouraging the meeting of people even when they come from different denominations or belief systems. This convergence of believers within the framework of pneumatological communal discernment is possible outside the formal settings.

## Conclusion

This article looked at the different aspects of communal discernment such as the communion of believers, the communal reading of scripture, the communal discernments of spirit(s), and the common commitment to carrying out the decision reached through communal discernment. While these have been important in helping us understand the value of communal discernment as opposed to individualised discernment, the article identified some gaps in the relevance of communal discernment in Pentecostalism. To bridge the gap, the article suggested pneumatological discernment based on the encounter with the Spirit, the hermeneutical Spirit, and the Holy Spirit discernment. The pneumatological discernment is relevant for the communion of spirit-filled believers, the communal reading of scripture, the discernment of spirits, and taking common decisions. The main aim of this article was to demonstrate that pneumatological communal discernment has a possibility of including those who are in the margins including women and children when it comes to making decisions. The findings are as follows: First, the Spirit has been poured upon all flesh including the women and the children. Second, the hermeneutical Spirit responsible for the illumination of scriptures also lives upon those in the margins. Lastly, the task of discerning between the Holy Spirit and the evil spirits is not only reserved for the elite but also for those who are in the margin. This means that pneumatological discernment is important for the inclusion of those in the margins when it comes to decision-making. The communal discernment should not only be understood from an ecclesiological point of view but also as a pneumatological phenomenon.

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