

Discerning the Work of the Holy Spirit

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Introduction

1. The Spirit has been central to the life of the Church from its inception. In the 20th century there was the development of Pentecostal churches and the Charismatic movement with their emphasis on the signs and work of the Spirit. Non Western churches have always been conscious of the importance of the Spirit. In the United Church the revised Preamble to the Constitution recognises that the Spirit of God was already in the land before the arrival of the colonisers. Even in secular society there is interest in things that are beyond normal perception. Spirituality in a broad sense has become affirmed. We live in a multicultural and multi-faith context. So how do we see the Spirit at work both in and beyond Christians and the churches? The Christian conviction is that the Holy Spirit is active in the world and in people's lives. Given the rapidity of social change, we need God's guidance as individuals and churches. Yet how do we discern the work of the Holy Spirit?
2. There is ambiguity and risk in identifying where the Spirit is active. People can be influenced by other spirits, the spirit of the age, the spirit of one's group or one's own desires, rather than the Holy Spirit. It is not easy to see if it really is the Spirit rather than subjective perception or other influences. There are some clues available to us, though we should always recognise that we never control the Spirit for the Spirit is like the wind and blows where it chooses. We do not know where it comes from or where it goes (John 3:8). Hence in seeking to discern the work of the Holy Spirit we best do so with humility and openness to being corrected.
3. The process of discernment is a theological one for it is of God and involves seeking to detect where God's Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is at work. The process requires relationship – relationship with God and with others in the community of faith and beyond. Such a process will include the following considerations.

Where the Spirit is

4. The Spirit is involved in creation. The psalm writer says, "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth" (Psalm 33:6). The word for 'breath' in Hebrew is the same as that for 'spirit.' Word and Spirit were both involved in God's act of creation. God's Spirit creates and sustains. The Spirit upholds and renews creation. Again the psalmist says, "When you send forth your spirit, they are created: and you renew the face of the ground" (Psalm 104:30). Paul speaks of the whole creation groaning (Romans 8:22). So where we see creation and its creatures suffering we may well see the Spirit wanting to bring about renewal and restoration. Jürgen Moltmann says the Spirit "has to be understood as the divine energy of life animating the new creation of all things" (*Spirit of Life* p.9).
5. The Spirit gives life, especially to human beings. In Genesis we read, "then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). The Spirit promotes life and restores life. In the history of ancient Israel the Spirit was held to come upon particular people to carry out God's purposes. Moses and other leaders were endowed with the Spirit during the time of the Exodus and entrance into Canaan. The Spirit enabled Moses to guide the people and make decisions. Later the Spirit came upon judges and was held to rest on kings. This does not mean that such people always acted in exemplary ways. This was often far from the case for they remained imperfect, finite, mortal human beings. Even King David committed adultery and was directly responsible for the wronged husband's death in an abuse of his royal position. He was rebuked by the prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 12:1-15).
6. The prophets experienced the Spirit in order to proclaim God's word into particular situations. Micah states, against false prophets who get no word from God, "But as

for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin" (Micah 3:8). Michael Welker says, "The power and authority of the person who bears God's Spirit lie in the fact that this person establishes justice, mercy and knowledge of God" (*God the Spirit* p.109).

7. Jesus said that you could distinguish between true and false prophets by their fruits. False prophets come in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves while true prophets are like good trees that bear good fruit (Matthew 7:15-20). Therefore one of the tests of whether the Spirit is at work through a particular person is the outcome of their lives which takes time. If the outcome is in accord with what we know of God's loving, just and peaceful purposes then God's Spirit was and is present.

The Spirit and Jesus

8. The Spirit was supremely at work in the life and ministry of Jesus. The Spirit was involved in his very birth and he was endowed with the Spirit throughout his life. At his baptism Luke describes the Spirit as descending on him in bodily form like a dove and a voice from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). In Mark's gospel we are told that "the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness" (Mark 1:12). There he was tempted as to the kind of Messiah he would be. At the commencement of his ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4: 18-19).
9. Going beyond those who experienced the Spirit before him, even Moses and the prophets, Jesus lived completely according to the will of God and his whole life from beginning to end was a Spirit filled one. He fulfilled the prophecies concerning the messianic king but did so unexpectedly as a suffering servant messiah. Throughout his ministry Jesus spoke with authority and performed healings and signs of power because of the Holy Spirit. Once when accused of performing exorcisms by the power of Satan, Jesus responded by saying that a divided country or family falls apart. "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Matthew 12:28).
10. When John sent two of his disciples to Jesus to ask the question, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus replied in the following way. He had just then cured many people of diseases and evil spirits and had given sight to many who were blind. He answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (Luke 7:22-23).
11. Jesus is described as "full of the Holy Spirit" (Luke 4:1). He was not only endowed with the Holy Spirit but also imparted it to others. In Mark's gospel John the Baptist says that he has baptised with water but the one to come "will baptise you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8). We regard receiving the Holy Spirit on the part of the disciples as taking place only after Jesus' death and resurrection. Nevertheless, Jesus' activities of proclamation of the reign of God, healing and casting out demons, and sending out his disciples to engage in the same activities, were surely all done in the power of the Holy Spirit.
12. The Spirit is closely related to Jesus. John gives us helpful indications of how this is so in his gospel. Jesus says, "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). Later Jesus says: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me,

because he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:13-14). George Hendry points out that these Spirit sayings:

lay marked stress on the unoriginality of the Spirit’s work: this work, if we may so express it, is simply to hold the spotlight on Christ, to glorify him by taking what is his and showing it to his disciples. The Spirit is to be remembrancer, not innovator (*The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology* p.23-24).

13. In discerning the Spirit we need to look to how congruent the activity is with what we know of Jesus and his ministry. For the Holy Spirit will not act in any way out of character with Jesus.
14. The Spirit gives life and new life. The supreme instance of this is the resurrection. Paul writes: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you” (Romans 8:11). Jesus was raised by God through the power of the Spirit. That same Spirit can give people new life, eternal life. The Holy Spirit therefore cannot be related to death and destruction but is the Spirit of life who would bring restoration and renewal.
15. It was after the resurrection that the disciples received the Holy Spirit in an explicit and powerful way. In John’s gospel the risen Jesus appeared to his fearful disciples and said, “Peace be with you.” After displaying that it really was him by showing them his hands and his side, he charged them to continue his mission saying, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Then we are told he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:19-23). So here we see Jesus deliberately imparting the Holy Spirit on his disciples in order that they carry out the mission he began. The Spirit gave them authority, guidance and power to do the things Jesus was doing in his earthly ministry. In an even more memorable way Luke describes the coming of the Holy Spirit on the disciples on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). It led to the first Christian message being preached by Peter and 3,000 people joining the nascent church. The Spirit is involved in leading people to Jesus Christ and building up the church, not for its own sake but that it may serve the ongoing ministry and mission of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit and the Church

16. It is the Spirit who is the agent of conversion (John 3:5-8). Paul says that no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3). The expectation in the early church was that the Holy Spirit was given with baptism, though the book of Acts records some variations on this (e.g. Acts 10:44-48). The Spirit provides the inner assurance of being a child of God (Romans 8:14-17). Growth in grace or sanctification is called for (John 17:19, 1 Thess.4:3-8). The Spirit grants people various gifts (1 Corinthians 12) and fruit (Galatians 5:22-23). Paul urges people to live by the Spirit and not to gratify the desires of the flesh (Galatians 5:16). If people live by the Spirit then they need to be guided by the Spirit which means not being conceited or envying one another (Galatians 5:25). It is for the common good that the Spirit is given (1 Corinthians 12:7). It is possible to grieve or resist the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). The Spirit enables unity despite differences for all were baptised into one body and drink the one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13).
17. The book of “The Acts of the Apostles” could equally be titled the book of “The Acts of the Holy Spirit” for it is the Spirit who led the development of the early church as Luke portrays it. Some clear instances of the work of the Holy Spirit are as follows. Stephen is described as full of grace and power. He performed signs and wonders and spoke with wisdom and the Spirit in the presence of opponents (Acts 6:8-10). While being stoned to death he prayed that God not hold this sin against them (Acts 7:60). Peter was given guidance concerning the acceptability of Gentiles via a Spirit inspired vision (Acts 10:19-20). Following this, Peter went to the house of Cornelius and spoke to the people there, and the Spirit was poured out on these Gentiles, who had an experience of the Spirit similar to the Pentecost experience of the Jewish

disciples (Acts 10:47). The first major issue the church had to deal with was the question of receiving Gentiles into the church. The meeting of key people in Jerusalem agreed not to impose Jewish criteria, notably circumcision, on Gentiles. The letter they sent to Antioch contained the memorable expression, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose no further burden than these essentials" (Acts 15:28). Paul's missionary movements were guided by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit gave both positive and negative direction. We are told that Paul and Timothy "went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia" (Acts 16:6). At Troas, Paul had a vision during the night. In the vision there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9).

18. The Holy Spirit guides the mission of the church, leads people into a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ and empowers individuals for witness and service. The Holy Spirit is not some vague power or life force but the Spirit of God. Migliore says, "To speak of the Holy Spirit in Christian theology is to speak not just of any spirit but of the Spirit of the triune God" (*Faith Seeking Understanding* p.169).
19. God is understood by Christians to be the living God known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christians refer to the Holy Spirit who is closely related to Jesus Christ, rather than simply speak of the Spirit in more general ways. H. Wheeler Robinson explains:
The concept of the Spirit was clarified, and the abnormalities of 'spiritual' phenomena had to meet such tests as Paul applied to them, tests inspired by the question, 'Is this the Spirit of Christ?' A new rich content was given to the energies of the Spirit, and this content was nothing less than the whole personality of Jesus Christ. The Spirit of God was personalised as never before, whilst the holiness of the Spirit was ethicised as never before (*The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit* p.136).
20. What the Spirit does is to lead people to Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God he proclaimed. Hence the Spirit is about interpreting Jesus to people, giving people new life in relation to God and others, building community, and providing promise and hope for the future.
21. In the early Christian community there was the recognition of the need to test the spirits to see if they really were of God or not. While individuals may be inspired by the Holy Spirit, this needs to be tested by the community of faith to ensure it really is of the Spirit and not from the person or some other spirit. John advises, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). What is said needs to be consistent with what we know of Jesus Christ and his ministry of inaugurating the reign of God. The work of the Holy Spirit will not contradict what Jesus Christ said and did. Nor will it be contrary to what we know of the way the Spirit acts in people's lives as recorded in the New Testament and the Bible as a whole.
22. As the church developed it often looked to prophets, martyrs and saints as people who were infused by the Holy Spirit. Prophets brought God's word which often was counter to the usual understandings or expectations of the time. Martyrs were able to keep faith and witness to it unto death enabled by the Spirit. Saints were known as people with Christ-like qualities. They were living means by which God's grace was mediated to others to the point of miracles being attributed to them through their lives.
23. Leaders in the church in particular have a responsibility to discern the work of the Holy Spirit and assist the community of faith to move forward according to the direction and enabling of the Spirit. The leaders of any church need to be willing to be corrected and to move in new directions towards where the Holy Spirit would take them. Given the constant change that society now experiences, this means being willing to change frequently rather than hoping for stability.

24. In the Uniting Church the use of consensus decision making processes seek to enable the Church to better hear the guidance of the Spirit by ensuring that minority voices are heard and listened to. For the Spirit may well come through those who have a different perspective or raise a concern to which the majority have not been alert.

Drawing on our Tradition

25. We can draw on the living tradition of the church as we seek to discern the work of the Holy Spirit. The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds are the two ecumenical creeds which the Uniting Church shares with the majority of other Christian churches. They give some guidance on the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. In the Nicene Creed the Spirit is called "the Lord, the giver of life". The Spirit is said to have spoken through prophets in particular. The Spirit is linked with the church, forgiveness, resurrection and the life of the world to come. In relation to the work of the Spirit, the person of the Spirit is bound up with the Father and the Son and is life giving. The Spirit's activity is consistent with these. In discerning the work of the Spirit, it is a matter of looking for what is life giving and in accord with the prophetic and saving ministry of Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen One.
26. We can be assisted by our Reformed and Evangelical tradition and the guidance provided by key figures such as Calvin and Wesley. John Calvin gave emphasis to the inspiration of Scripture and the inner witness by which the Spirit makes effective for the devout reader the message of Scripture. For Calvin prayer was the principal exercise and expression of faith and a disciplined life was expected. John Wesley also stressed the centrality of the Bible and the importance of the interior witness of the Spirit. He too emphasised prayer and searching the scriptures. He also encouraged 'Christian conference' that is conversation with fellow Christians and fostered small groups and other opportunities to enable such conversations. Preaching and the sacraments were important to both Calvin and Wesley as means of grace. The work of the Spirit is discerned through reading the Bible, prayer, worship and in conversation with other Christians.
27. The heart of the Uniting Church's *Basis of Union* is paragraph three in which the Church is described as "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit." God in Christ gives the Holy Spirit to all people in the Church "as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation." The Church's call is to serve that end. It does so by being "a fellowship of reconciliation," using the diverse gifts of its members to build up the whole and by being "an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself" (BU par 3). The congregation is the embodiment of this "fellowship of the Spirit in Christ" (BU par 15).
28. The Church is nourished by Word and Sacraments and the Spirit is given that the Church may not "lose the way" (BU par 3) and will "constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life" (BU par 18). The Uniting Church prays that through the Spirit God "will use its worship, witness and service to God's eternal glory through Jesus Christ the Lord (BU par 18).
29. When we look to where the Spirit was clearly at work in people's lives and in history, it is frequently the case that the people went against the grain of their society. They brought a different perspective to bear and were often opposed by the authorities of their day. *Uniting in Worship 2* has a calendar of commemorations celebrating the lives of Christian people listed with such descriptions as: witnesses to Jesus, Christian thinkers, faithful servants, reformers, Christian pioneers, martyrs and people of prayer. Through them we see the Holy Spirit at work. Below are two brief examples of people led by the Spirit and thirdly the establishment of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress with Charles Harris as a key leader.
30. Born of Albanian parents in Skopje, Yugoslavia, Mother Teresa wanted to respond to God's call by becoming a missionary having heard of work in the Calcutta

Archdiocese. She was sent to the Loreto Abbey in Dublin, Ireland and from there to India. For twenty years Mother Teresa taught at St Mary's High School in Calcutta. For some years she was also a principal of the school and in charge of an Indian religious order attached to the Loreto Sisters. She loved teaching but then came a change of direction. In 1946 she was going to Darjeeling to make her retreat. In the train she heard the call to give up all and to follow Christ into the slums to serve him among the poorest of the poor. Later she regarded this as a call within a call. It was surely the leading of the Holy Spirit that led to her subsequent ministry and the establishment of the Missionaries of Charity.

31. As a young man John Flynn felt a strong compulsion to serve God and his fellows. He began as a teacher. He was also leader of a young men's Bible class that involved Bible studies, camps, socials, hikes, bicycle rides and fishing expeditions. He developed a passion for photography, gained a first aid certificate, and began doing some journalism. He then became a Home Missionary and was appointed to Beech Forest, a timber town. His potential was recognised by the Victorian Director of Home Missions, Donald Cameron. He became a theological student in Melbourne in 1907. At the end of 1909 came a watershed. At Donald Cameron's suggestion he was given a letter written by a Mrs Jessie Litchfield in Darwin outlining the need for ministry in the vast areas of the Northern Territory and requesting a missionary be sent. He was contemplating becoming a missionary to Korea though he felt his place was in Australia. Now his direction was set and Donald Cameron was able to establish a 'special work' for him. This developed into his life's work as he sought to provide for people in remote areas of Australia. The Spirit guided him in it resulting in using radio communication, flying doctors, patrol ministries, hospitals and places to care for the aged and children. As he ministered in the name of Christ he sought to provide a 'mantle of safety' for remote people.
32. In 1979 a revival movement commenced on Elcho Island and hundreds of people made commitments to Jesus Christ. This movement of the Holy Spirit spread quickly through Arnhem Land and throughout other Aboriginal communities, especially in Western Australia. Around this time an outspoken Aboriginal activist and minister at the West End congregation in Townsville, Charles Harris, reported to the Presbytery of North Queensland that national and state church leaders would be invited to a meeting at Crystal Creek just north of Townsville for a threefold meeting: developing an Australian theology related to indigenous issues; challenging the churches to take action on these issues; and developing a Christian commitment to the struggle of the oppressed people of Australia. In 1982 this important meeting took place. It was here that Aboriginal Christians began to talk about their own organisation. They believed that God was leading them to set this up, and so plans were made for a completely autonomous, indigenous body within the Uniting Church. To help make this happen, a national conference was called together at Galiwin'ku Elcho Island in August 1983. This meeting brought traditional and urban Christian people together. One of the UAICC's main founders Charles Harris challenged people to take up the call to discipleship. Small groups reported on such important matters as evangelism, ministry, stewardship, land rights, culture, housing, politics, employment, youth work and racism. The meeting decided to set up a national organisation called the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. Charles then sent people out with the stirring words: "History has been created. God's purpose has been fulfilled. Be advocates of peace. Let us break down the walls of racism. As we go forward the gates of hell will not prevail against us." In 1985, the Assembly of the Uniting Church unanimously welcomed and agreed to officially support what Aboriginal and Islander people were seeking – the formation of the Congress. The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress came into being.

The place of Experience and Reason

33. The Spirit touches people at different points in their lives though they may not be able to interpret these very well. Christians bring their own experiences of life and God, and perceptions as to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, gained through reading the Bible, prayer, Christian conversation and participation in the life of the Church. Their

own personal experience and the cultural background they bring enrich the collective experience of the community of faith. The Church is to be a multicultural community benefiting from the experiences of many cultures which nevertheless need to be critiqued from the perspective of the gospel. Those who are in touch with particular groups of people and situations bring that first hand experience to the church community. Especially where there is suffering or need the Spirit will be present and may well guide people in particular ways. Where there is reconciliation and renewal taking place the Spirit will be active. Where power politics is dominating people and a non violent counter movement emerges the Spirit is involved.

34. Many Uniting Church people have had contact with Pentecostal or Charismatic churches and conferences, and have witnessed or experienced speaking in tongues, prophecy and healing ministry. These are clearly spoken of as indications of the activity of the Spirit. While these have caused divisions in the past, exaggerated claims have now been modified and many people are open to them if they are conducted with the kinds of consideration that Paul provides in his letters especially to the Corinthians. Uniting Church congregations vary as to the attention given to these but if we are attentive to the Spirit then these experiences are part of our tradition past and present. So we need to enable people to locate them within our approach to the Christian faith.
35. As rational as well as emotional creatures, people are to use their intellects to make judgments as to the adequacy of ideas and proposals. They can prayerfully consider what others say seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit as well as drawing on their own knowledge and experience. We are called to grow in our faith and this includes growth in our understanding. This is not just an individualistic activity but is to be carried out in conversation with others and making use of contemporary knowledge. The truth or the best ways forward are generally first discerned by an individual or group of people. They may then need to convince the larger group. Imaginatively entering into others' thought patterns is an important part of using one's reason. Being able to picture what is being proposed enables people to grasp the ideas.
36. It is important to realise that the Spirit may well lead people to do things that are contrary to current norms and understandings. As Christians and as church we should be suspicious of proposals and activities that on closer inspection are self serving or oppress others. Christians are to seek the guidance of God's Spirit rather than the spirit of the age, though sometimes it is through the spirit of the age that God's Spirit is at work. The Spirit of God is free to work in our multicultural and multi-religious world beyond as well as in the church. When people say or do things that do not seem rational or realistic according to received thinking but are in line with the kinds of things Jesus was about, such as healing and reconciliation, challenging vested interests and peacemaking, bringing God's loving and just rule to bear, then the Spirit may well be actively present. Seeking to discern the Spirit is an ongoing task in our changing world

Conclusion

37. The work of the Holy Spirit then is discerned through individuals in community. The Spirit is given for the benefit of persons and for the building up of community. Further the Spirit is given so that the people of God are involved in the mission of God, namely the reconciliation and renewal of creation, through worship, witness and service. Where this is taking place, or where we can see that God would have us be involved, there we can discern the Holy Spirit wanting to bring new life and wholeness to people and creation. We do so humbly and with openness to correction or being given clearer direction by God as to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Study Guide

This paper could be used by presbyteries and church councils/home groups as a discussion paper in one of their meetings. The paper could be provided to people ahead of time to read. Or it could be given out and some reading time identified. Then people could discuss the

paper in small groups making use of the questions below. Depending on the time allocated selected questions could be chosen. As well as small group discussion, it would be desirable to have some reporting back to the whole group of comments that were significant in their small group. This would need to be kept within the timeframe allowed. The goal is to assist people to appreciate the work of the Holy Spirit and how to discern this.

Questions for discussion

Share your understanding of the work of the Spirit in the world.

Where do you see the Spirit in relation to creation?

What biblical figures do you see as led by the Spirit and why?

What stood out for you in the section on Jesus and the Spirit?

What passages in the New Testament on the Holy Spirit are significant for you?

Share about people you have known whose lives were clearly led by the Holy Spirit.

What experiences of the Spirit can you identify, recognising sometimes it is only later that we can name them?

What are the main criteria we can use to 'test the spirits'?