

SPIRITUALITY AT WORK

BY LAURIE LATTIMORE-VOLKMANN

When Seventh Avenue Presbyterian Church in San Francisco sought a decision about bringing in a new ministry under its church programs, elders and staff members did not have the traditional committee meeting, discussion and vote that denominational polity has often dictated.

Instead elders and staff members entered into a five-month process that involved intense contemplative practice by the group to consider what the inclusion would mean for the church. No discussion or debate was included initially, but participants were asked to spend one month praying and thinking about the various comments. After further presentation of information about the program, the body spent a second month praying specifically about their concerns regarding the issue. The process ended with a nearly three-hour meeting in which the group came to unanimous consensus on what it believed to be the Holy Spirit's leading over the issue.

"That's how we do all of our business – intentional discernment," says the Rev. Jeff Gaines, pastor of Seventh Avenue and a staff member for SFTS Diploma in the Art of Spiritual Direction program. "It takes time because you wait for God to show up."

Such decision making in Presbyterian churches across the nation is not typical but is growing in its practice among clergy and church leaders.

The Rev. **Timothy Mooney** (D.A.S.D. '00), a Presbyterian minister and full-time artist living in California's East Bay, emphasizes that this approach of incorporating spiritual discernment in church operations requires leaders to hold an attitude of indifference, which is not easy for many to do. "It is not what I think but what the Holy Spirit thinks," says Mooney. "We have to be willing to go in a different direction and hold onto our ideas

very loosely." Mooney adds that spiritual discernment is rooted in Scripture and is absolutely not a "do what you want" mentality.

And if the direction that such discernment leads to is differs from what the pastor or others thought they wanted initially, "then you have to trust that God's design was something else," says **Joan Currey**, director of Companions on the Inner Way, a week-long retreat ministry program under the auspices of Seventh Avenue.

But spiritual discernment still tends to make people uncomfortable, clergy and theologians admit. "Many are still resistant because it is not the personality of everyone," says the Rev. Dr. **Elizabeth Nordquist**, associate professor of spirituality. She adds that it is still difficult to get many in the church – as well as academics – to view spiritual direction as a legitimate discipline. "The mindset is very slow in turning."

The Rev. **Tom Glenn** (M.Div. '70, D.A.S.D. '02), a Presbyterian minister in Columbia, S.C., says this is because the church is generally still suspicious of spiritual experience being a driving force in decision making. "It threatens doctrine, which is exactly what happened in the early church," he notes.

The Rev. **Daniel Wolpert** (M.Div. '00), author of the book "Leading a Life with God," emphasizes the importance of listening to God and being silent more often. In his book, he shares his early experiences in church leadership where he discovered committee meetings were just like board meetings in the corporate sector – a lot of talking, a lot of debating, and hardly any direction sought from God.

"We are dying from a lack of silence," Wolpert says, noting American society is one of sensory overload. "At first it is difficult to listen, but as you get into it, it is easier and workable and fun and amazing."