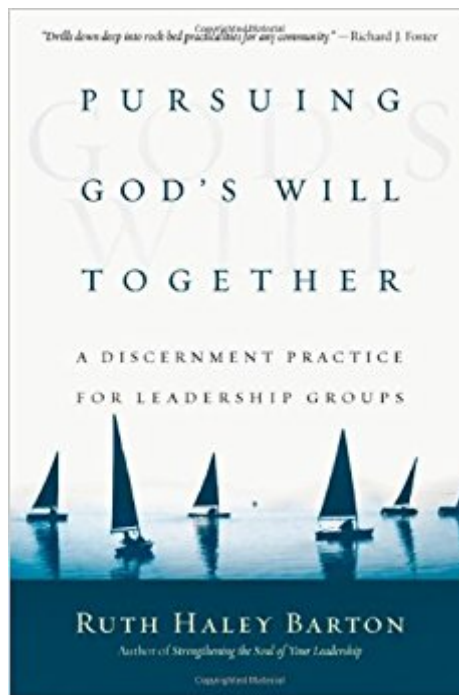




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Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice For Leadership Groups (Transforming Center Set)



Synopsis

2013 Logos Book of the Year in Spirituality/Devotional Meetings can sap our energy, rupture community and thoroughly demoralize us. They can go on forever with no resolution. Or they can rush along without consensus just to "get through the agenda." What if there was another way? Church boards and other Christian leadership teams have long relied on models adapted from the business world. Ruth Haley Barton, president of the Transforming Center, helps teams transition to a much more suitable model—the spiritual community that discerns God's will together. In these pages you will discover personal and group practices that will lead you into a new way of experiencing community and listening to God together.

Book Information

Series: Transforming Center Set

Hardcover: 256 pages

Publisher: IVP Books; First Ed 1st Printing edition (June 18, 2012)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0830835660

ISBN-13: 978-0830835669

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 1 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars 50 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #62,573 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #97 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Churches & Church Leadership > Church Leadership #148 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Churches & Church Leadership > Pastoral Resources #1150 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Christian Living > Spiritual Growth

Customer Reviews

"Ruth Haley Barton is a gifted distiller of historic best practices for community discernment and direction. Exercising her counsel on the rare 'vow of stability' would by itself rescue multiple organizations from broken strategic trajectories. I highly recommend Pursuing God's Will Together for leaders, teams and organizations." (Dr. Bruce McNicol, president, Truefaced Inc.) "Pursuing God's Will Together is a much-needed corrective to our headstrong individualism today. It drills down deep into rock-bed practicalities for any community seeking to discern the will of God together. I recommend it highly." (Richard J. Foster, author of Celebration of Discipline and Sanctuary of the Soul) "Fabulous! I look forward to giving copies to our staff and elders. Ruth

provides a practical, powerful road map so we can discern the most important question as a leadership team: What is God's will for us on a particular issue?" (Pete Scazzero, pastor of New Life Fellowship Church and author of *The Emotionally Healthy Church*) "While there has been a revival of interest in spiritual disciplines for some time, there is precious little available about how to practice them in community. More specifically, there is almost nothing about helping Christian leaders discern God's presence and activities together. That is, until now. With *Pursuing God's Will Together*, Ruth Haley Barton—a recognized leader in spiritual formation—fills this need admirably. This is an important, unique book that will be sure to transform Christian corporate leadership from a pure business model to a more spiritually integrated approach. I highly recommend it." (J. P. Moreland, professor of philosophy, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, and author of *The God Question*) "I have been grateful for Ruth Haley Barton's wisdom in the past on spiritual disciplines so crucial for the soul of a leader. I am sure her latest work will be of great benefit to those who seek the grace of discernment in their work and ministries." (Gary Haugen, president and CEO, International Justice Mission) "*Pursuing God's Will Together* is a powerfully convicting and timely book for those of us who are fully aware that we are incapable of effective leadership apart from God's wisdom and direction. How to discern God's purposes individually and as a dynamic team is the genius of this compellingly creative call to kingdom movement. Ruth Haley Barton presents us with a proven—if at times painful—practice that can ultimately take our finite efforts to where our infinite God wants them to go." (Harold B. Smith, president and CEO, Christianity Today International) "I like this book. It is wise, thoughtful, gracious and a little bit disturbing—Ruth will surely upset some of your preconceived notions. If you are like me, you believe in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but you want to be wise and not presumptuous about knowing God's will for your group. This book is a real gift to folks like us. It provides us with much more than simply a plan of action. You can use it yourself, but it will also be quite useful to you with your fellow decision makers, so that discerning God's will together becomes an experience in spiritual growth for the whole team." (John Yates, rector, The Falls Church) "In *Pursuing God's Will Together* [Ruth Haley Barton] weaves her own wisdom with others in bringing forth a beautiful tapestry of spirituality in community." (Chuck Olsen, founder, Worshipful-Work, and author of *Transforming Church Boards*) "It's impossible to overstate how needed, valuable, timely and timeless this book is. It is as wise as Methuselah and as practical as a slingshot. Ruth has rendered a massive service to church leaders everywhere, and to all the churches they lead. Herein lies the remedy for the sad but common malady we see today: otherwise godly men and women pursuing God's kingdom with worldly navigational equipment. I plan to buy a case of *Pursuing God's Will Together* upon its

release and make it mandatory reading for all of our leaders. It can hardly come soon enough." (Mark Buchanan, pastor, New Life Community Baptist Church, author of *Spiritual Rhythm and Your Church Is Too Safe*) "This book needs a warning label: 'Content may be disruptive to your understanding of Christian life, leadership and community.' Ruth Haley Barton has provided every Christian with an invaluable resource for discerning and fulfilling the purposes of God. In a world where Christians and Christian leadership and communities have largely succumbed to secular processes for decision making, Barton brings a clear, challenging and compelling call for a radical alternative. This book is not the product of a 'theorist,' but the mature distillation of Barton's own journey into a life hid with Christ in God for the sake of others. This is a must-read for every Christian leader and leadership group, and a primer for every Christian." (M. Robert Mulholland Jr., professor emeritus, Asbury Theological Seminary, and author of *Invitation to a Journey and The Deeper Journey*) "Ruth Haley Barton knows only too well that discerning God's will requires a personal commitment to transformation as well as an openness to engage in a group process. In *Pursuing God's Will Together*, she shows us in a systematic way how it's done. Every Christian leader will benefit from such a practical approach to such an ancient practice." (Albert Haase, O.F.M., author of *This Sacred Moment*) "Ruth Haley Barton has identified an important issue in spiritual leadership and in how we make decisions, revealing where our integrity as leaders lies. Do we really believe that God has something to say, by his Holy Spirit, in terms of what direction we take? Ruth does a great job of describing practices that can help teams become more adept at hearing God's voice in the practical areas of leading and serving." (Doug Nuenke, U.S. director, The Navigators)

Ruth Haley Barton (DD, Northern Seminary) is founding president of the Transforming Center, a spiritual formation ministry to pastors and Christian leaders. A trained spiritual director (Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation), teacher and retreat leader, she has served on the pastoral staff of several churches, including Willow Creek Community Church. A sought-after teacher, preacher and consultant to leadership teams, she is currently adjunct professor of spiritual transformation at Northern Seminary. Educated at Wheaton College, Northern Seminary and Loyola University Chicago Institute for Pastoral Studies, Ruth is the author of numerous books and resources on the spiritual life, including *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*, *Sacred Rhythms*, *Longing for More* and *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*. She is also the author of an online resource titled *eReflections*, spiritual guidance via e-mail. She contributes regularly to *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation*.

Warning! This is a dangerous book (I'll explain). And it's certainly a no-brainer Top-10 book for 2012 for pastors, ministry leaders and board members. Ruth Haley Barton has the audacity to write, "Just because something is strategic does not necessarily mean it is God's will for us right now." She says that our staff meetings and board meetings must move from decision-making to discernment.

"Spiritual discernment is the ability to distinguish between good (that which is of God and draws us closer to God) and evil (that which is not of God and draws us away from God)." She adds, "Many of us have been taught that leadership is having the answer, and we come into meetings we are leading prepared to bestow that wisdom on our trusty followers; we might ask God for wisdom in a prayer that sounds very spiritual, but the truth is, there isn't much room for God to do or say anything other than what we already have in mind." Spiritual leadership has a different flavor believes the author. "There are many qualities that contribute to good leadership, but it is our commitment to discerning and doing the will of God through the help of the Holy Spirit that distinguishes spiritual leadership from other kinds of leadership." And there's the problem: most of us want to do the will of God, but few of us are willing to invest the time to learn, practice and facilitate a spiritual discernment process. (Raise your hand if your board has a designated "discernmentarian." How about a wise sage? Barton says you need both.)

About 75 pages into this dangerous book, I grieved the wasted years of clever PowerPoints, flipchart busy-work, 31-tab binders and too many frequent flier miles...just soldiering on...when, in fact, I was focused on the wrong thing. To think that, instead, we could have actually heard from Almighty God Himself! Ruth Haley Barton got my attention in 2009 with her extraordinary book, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry*, especially the chapters on spiritual discernment. Then several clients mentored me with stunning moments of discernment. The blinders fell off. I began to see God's work with new eyes. You will too, if you do the hard work of reading, reflecting and praying through this book--but don't do it alone. Each chapter begins with Barton's keeping-it-real continuing story of Grace Church, a fictitious megachurch in the Pacific Northwest. Grace has vision, passion, a gifted top-notch team "and they wore cool jeans." Trust me--she's been in our churches, sniffed around, and knows way too much! Dangerous? Have you every gathered your team or board for a fork-in-the-road decision and prayed for "holy indifference" (a good thing)? She writes, "At the beginning of any leadership discernment process, it is good to be reminded to ask for the grace to be indifferent to matters of ego, prestige, organizational politics, personal opinion, personal advantage or even ownership of a pet project. We ask God for the grace to desire his will--nothing more, nothing less, nothing else." "If we do not reach the point of

indifference, or if we are not at least honest about the fact that we are not indifferent, the discernment process becomes little more than a rigged election."Dangerous? How about instead of feeble attempts at conflict resolution, you practice conflict transformation--and, says Barton--it's a prerequisite to the discernment process.Dangerous? "Have you ever been part of a meeting in which people were so tired that they made a decision just so they could go home? Have you ever participated in a decision-making process knowing that you were resorting to 'sloppy desperation' just because you were exhausted?"You'll appreciate the been there/done that elephant-in-the-room stories--and how a spiritual discernment process can lead you to a healthy culture. Barton will inspire you--and give you tools--for the priority task of discerning your team's values. Her ten guidelines for "entering into and maintaining a listening posture" are both brilliant and practical. You'll want to laminate the list and bring it to every meeting. (Hey, Hank! Read No. 3 again! "DO NOT INTERRUPT!")Dangerous? Barton warns us about attempting spiritual discernment when there are no spiritually discerning people in the room. So she plows deep into that field with practical exercises for preparing the ground. (The harvest takes time.)But the point of all this is not more visionary leadership, better decisions, S.M.A.R.T. goals, bigger budgets or fewer staff or board conflicts. "The main point of discerning the will of God is to do it." And then she encourages us with I Thess. 5:24, "...the one who has called you will be faithful to bring it to pass."I just bought 30 copies.

Once I decided to get past the borderline psychobabble (i.e. "false-self pattern" - a phrase never defined in this book), I think the book has merit. One challenge faced by our board of Elders must be met - the temptation to implement the discernment process in chapters 9-12 without doing the hard, individual/group work in chapters 1-8. We went from "let's do the process" to "let's summarize the first 8 chapters" to "let's do what's in the first 8 chapters, then try the process".This is not a quick-fix book. If you have to make a big decision this month (that's where we started), look elsewhere. The virtue of Barton's approach is that it focuses on transforming the individuals first, operating on the premise that if I can't truly discern God's will in my own life, I am unlikely to successfully discern it for my church or ministry when working with a group of similarly ill-equipped leaders. This is a journey, not a technique. I don't know if we'll make it to our intended destination, but those of us who work at it should experience some transformation in our own lives, which alone would make the effort worthwhile.

I am in the process of transitioning our church leadership teams and committees into spiritual communities of practice. In other words, I am seeking to have each team and committee

(eventually) not just be a group of people that seeks to do business, but a small group that has a particular ministry and learning focus. The idea is that leadership within the church will be a growing and learning process, and not just another meeting I have to show up to. The teams will become life-giving communities instead of simply obligations. That is the goal. I was in the process of introducing this paradigm shift when I discovered this book. This book calls leadership teams in congregations and other Christ-centered organizations to become communities of spiritual discernment. The first three quarters of the book teaches the readers how to establish a discernment culture within the organization. The final quarter of the book unveils a clear, practical methodology for practicing discernment in leadership gatherings and communities. I have enjoyed this book so much that I am in the process of buying the book for each member of the leadership board of our church with my own money. It is a superb introduction to doing ministry in a different way. It is going to be a great tool for moving us away from a purely business model of church leadership, and moving toward being a wisdom-seeking leadership team. I love it.

There is something to be said when people commit to seeking God's face in a communal setting. Barton's book addresses this idea as she walks the reader through twelve chapters of what it will take for a group to move from non-community to community, from non-discernment to discerning God's direction together. The key issue for leaders that Barton hits on again and again is the need to seek and ask God for wisdom and discernment. There is a spiritual ingredient here, as the group gets more real and open with each other and as they together learn to discern God's voice, amazing things can happen. The author does not mince words here, as she also declares that we cannot discern and hear God's voice and direction if we are not also doing this very same thing on an individual level. Part of living in a covenant community as a leader, one must also press into seeking God on a personal level. These two go hand in hand. Leadership community and discernment are not just going to happen. There must be commitment from the group to pursue God. This book will challenge your individual times with God and build the bridge to do this effectively in a group context. If you want to make a true heart commitment to join God in what He desires to do through you, then this book is a must read. But, read with caution, as you will be challenged, convicted and changed.

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