

## Listening to the Spirit

By Marilyn Schwieterman, Chris Horner and Ed Koenke

From a working weekend retreat in 1996. Documented in the publication, *Just Do Whatever He Tells You: A Practical Guide for Building Lay Christian Communities*, available through NACMS.

God calls each of us – you and me and us – as community. With open hearts and minds we become aware and with God's grace we can act.

In community individual members and the community as a whole can begin to be aware of the Spirit's action and aware of life as a cycle of listen/discriminate/act, listen/discriminate/act. Scripture gives us stories of the Spirit working with and through community.

Prayer is an obvious way to listen and speak in discernment with God. Contemplation, meditation, scripture reading and sharing, seeking advice, listening to friends and mentors, listening to the community, sharing thoughts within community are all ways to listen. Sometimes just keeping our minds open through our eyes and ears, we hear something that sparks us with an energy that says to keep listening.

Community listening together can discern the promptings of the Spirit within the community. The Spirit may also work through the individual during a period of community discernment.

Sometimes individual members ask the community to help them discern where they are being called by the Spirit. In this way, the Spirit works through the community in the individual's discernment process.

How does Mary fit into discernment? As Marianists, we look to Mary as a model of the qualities needed for discernment:

- Openness, awareness of the Spirit's stirring
- Patience, willingness to wait
- Acceptance, acting upon the Spirit's call

Mary said, "Yes". Were other asked first and said, "No"? Mary, as a human being, had the option to say "no" to the Spirit but she said, "yes" as we are called to do. As exemplified in the Cana story, if we are to "do whatever he tells you," we must know what "he" is saying.

The Marianist image of Mary is of a person who is alive in each of us. Mary is active and impels us to action from within our communities. She teaches us to enflesh Jesus as she did. Mary is not a statue, devotion, or apparition. She is a real human mentor who is very present in our lives.

The Spirit calls us only to actions that deepen faith and love. We will never be called to something that does not carry forth the Gospel message. Our action will always enflesh Christ into our world and affect those we serve with gentleness and simplicity. It will create unity and develop better stewardship.

### **An example of a person's discernment impacting the community:**

"I was experiencing a deep urging to reach out beyond my Marianist endeavors to the wider church/community/world. My Marianist community had developed to the point that we were also feeling ready to move out – not just 'do' a project. Something deeper and from within seemed more appropriate. Reflective questions at a community Lenten prayer service, as well as reflection questions helped the discernment for me. At the end of the service a member mentioned having taken a phone call that day from Interfaith Action for a Violence Free America. This group holds memorial prayer services at the sites of violent deaths within our city. Three of us attended the next prayer vigil. Since then, the commitment of the individuals, as well as of the whole community, has grown. Two of us are now serving as leaders for Interfaith Action prayer services. There is a phone-circle notification in place and those members who can come to the vigils do, and those who cannot attend pray at home, maybe lighting a candle at the time of prayer."