

# BOOK REVIEW

**Sue Richardson pbvm, and Brian Gallagher msc, 2009: *Communal Wisdom: A practical guide for group discernment*, Nelen Yubu Productions, Sydney, NSW.**

On a warm New York City evening some thirty-something years ago, Fr Daniel Berrigan sj exhorted an exuberant crowd of more than 100,000 peace activists, 'don't just do something, sit there!' Dan Berrigan would have appreciated and endorsed the insights and strategies offered in *Communal Wisdom*. And, indeed, there are already many in 2009 who also recognise and welcome the value and usefulness of this small but impressive book. Even in the short time since its publication, *Communal Wisdom* is proving to be very popular with readers.

In its compilation and presentation the authors of *Communal Wisdom* set a fine example of what they propose for their readers. From the Foreword by Denis Edwards at its opening to the Recommended Reading at its close, and through careful drawing on insights of 'wise people' throughout the book, Sue Richardson and Brian Gallagher offer communal wisdom to support and enhance their case for reflective and spirit-filled discernment as the key for truly effective group work.

We are, of course, in our Western, democratic, way, accustomed to forums, symposiums, seminars and the like, where it is expected that everyone may have their voice heard. Shared input through dialogue, discussion, debate, dispute... this is taken for granted in most organisations and their sub-groups. Such a process is seen as (most) effective for determining what is the 'will of the group' and in the best interests of—at least—the majority. Such a process proves itself successful where the aim of groups is to discover what is the best thing to do, or the best way to achieve results; that process is appropriate when looking for a recipe for outcomes following a thorough sifting, distilling, weighing or whatever of ideas to achieve consensus or closure relat-

ing to the issues on the group's agenda That is decision-making based on collective wisdom, derived from the sum of the individual contributions.

All that is significantly different, however, from the discernment brokered through the process of coming to appreciate communal wisdom as proposed and developed in the book under review. The special insight to be gained from *Communal Wisdom* is richer and deeper - though more challenging and perhaps more elusive to start with.

When people come together to discern the will of God for the group, they come not as individuals or factions to convince - or maybe coerce - the others to choose what they think valuable for all. A whole new dimension transforms the focus of the group; a catalyst transcending individual members of the group is needed. The insight is that, under the guidance of the Spirit, the group—as group—may develop its own connections, cohesion, and collaboration, thereby achieving a new (communal) wisdom, and so come to its own awareness of possibilities.

The authors, reflecting on the experience of group discernment, as distinct from discussion, are then able to propose appropriate strategies for allowing this to happen. Far from the energy evoked through the maelstrom of the 'think-tank', the counter strategy is to be quiet, reflective, take time, allow the Spirit a chance to work with us... for discernment is not about dealing effectively with the known, but awaiting, allowing, the emergence of the unknown, maybe the unexpected. While group discussion might reasonably allow for everyone to have a say, group discernment is more designed so that everyone might have a listen! While the key to success in group discussion might be the triumph of the head, group dis-

cernment rather promotes the engagement of the heart. While the outcome for group discussion is a sense of achievement, those engaged in group discernment look for inspiration to guide them to success.

A reading of *Communal Wisdom* also encourages reflection on Scriptural bases for this type of discernment: for example, the gathered disciples, with Mary, awaiting the coming of the Spirit, in *Acts* 1, the imaging of *community as body*—with its many parts as gift to the others, all working in harmony—in *1 Corinthians* 12 and *Ephesians* 4, and the *com-*

*munity as building* in *Ephesians* 2. Jesus himself on a number of occasions urges ‘those who have ears to hear, let them listen’, evoking the distinction between simply hearing words and the art of listening to the message.

*Communal Wisdom* is not a manual, a ‘how to’ book—though strategies and processes are proposed for consideration. *Communal Wisdom* is an inspirational book in the very best sense. *Communal Wisdom* is a book well worth reading—but just as importantly, a book for listening!

—Philip Malone MSC

---

## NEW RELIGIOUS BOOKS BY AUSTRALASIAN AUTHORS

### KEVIN MARK

**Church Administration Handbook; Brian Lucas; Peter Slack; William d’Apice; St Pauls; HB \$45 [9781921032653]; 393pp; 250x180mm; 2008**

Comprehensive Australian reference work that provides expert guidance on ecclesiastical law and civil legislation relevant to Church-based organisations. The opening chapters concisely explain the Catholic Church’s meaning, membership and mission. An overview of Canon Law follows. Subsequent chapters cover topics such as various levels of administration in the Church, parish ministry, the administration of temporal goods, managing documentation, and working with others. Authors have extensive experience in church administration and law. Foreword by Philip Wilson, Archbishop of Adelaide and President of ACBC. Reference footnotes; index. Lucas is a priest of the Archdiocese of Sydney and General Secretary of the Australia Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC). Slack is Parish Priest of St Mary’s Casino, Associate Judicial Vicar of the Regional Tribunal and Director of the Diocese of Lismore Office of the Tribunal. D’Apice is a solicitor practising in Sydney and has been an advisor to the ACBC and

various dioceses and religious congregations.

**The Church and the Bible: Official documents of the Catholic Church; Dennis J. Murphy MSC; St Pauls/Alba House, USA, dist. by St Pauls Australia; HB \$42.95 [9780818912504]; 1144pp; 225x150mm; 2007**

Second edition of a work first published in India in 2000. Collection of ecclesiastical documents regarding the scriptures, from the second century to a statement by Pope Benedict XVI in 2006. Includes opening chapters providing background information on the interpretation of such documents and their varying authority, and an historical overview. The texts are presented chronologically, are dated and include brief introductory notes. For this edition the introduction and background section have been extensively revised and 14 documents added, including the full texts of four major documents by the Pontifical Biblical Commission from the period 1983 to 2001. Footnotes; index of scripture texts; index of subject and names; index of Latin names of documents. Author is a graduate of the Gregorian University and the Pontifical Bib-