

Helping Your Local Church Grow Up

In Ephesians 4:11-13 the apostle Paul shares explicitly his vision for spiritual growth in the church. Paul writes, “It was [Jesus] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” Clearly the goal of the church is not only to convert people to Christ, but to “mature” them in Christ. The Church, at least over the past few decades, has named this maturation process “spiritual formation.”

As a local church pastor, I constantly wrestled with questions that Ephesians 4:11-13 raises. Is my pastoral leadership really assisting people in their spiritual formation? Am I facilitating or hindering the development of Christ-like living in the people I serve? Do people in the church I serve seem to grow deeper the further they journey with Christ through our church? These are sobering questions that, at least on some days, have actually haunted me. Perhaps the better, more intentional question to ask is, How can the church I lead develop a culture of spiritual growth, a culture in which all people not only recognize our need for continued growth but know how to incorporate practices into our lives that will facilitate our growing up in Christ? In the pages that follow I intend to lay out an overall vision and strategy for the spiritual formation process in a local church. While it may not fit your ministry context perfectly, perhaps you can glean a few ideas to implement in the church you serve.

Embodying the Vision for Spiritual Growth

Any effective and compelling vision for spiritual formation in the local church should be embodied by its senior leader. As the lead pastor seeks to help others experience the “whole measure of the fullness of Christ,” that leader must be intentional about the same pursuit for her/his own journey in Christ. Hunger for spiritual formation is, to some extent, more caught than taught. As senior leaders in the church commit faithfully to a compelling spiritual rule of life, it will contagiously rub off on the people around them. I know this because the intentional spiritual growth in the lives of other leaders has been extremely challenging and compelling to me. It seems that Jesus modeled the pursuit of spiritual formation among the twelve and, especially, within His inner circle of Peter, James, and John. The more time they spent with Jesus the more they saw him commune with the Father and the more they likely became convinced of the necessity of spiritual disciplines to guide their own lives and ministries. Simply put, the vision for spiritual formation must be birthed in the hearts of local church leaders if it is going to impact the entire church.

Henry and Richard Blackaby, in Spiritual Leadership, affirm the importance of the pastor’s spiritual depth. They write, “In people’s attempts to enlist a following, some have resorted to developing the appearance of a leader rather than developing the character of a leader....with the right kind of help, people can generate a lot of hype but they are really only pseudo leaders....they have image but no substance” (87). In order to avoid this, the leader must continue to practice Christian disciplines that cultivate spiritual depth. As leaders embody this quest for spiritual formation in their own lives, it can ripple out toward all who participate in the life of the church.

Communicating the Vision for Spiritual Growth

In addition to authentic modeling of the vision for Christian growth, the leader must learn to communicate the vision for growth. One of the practical ways for leaders to do this is by including, as often as possible, *teaching, testimony, or spiritual exercises* that highlight the importance of spiritual growth during a portion of every gathering (i.e., worship services, staff meetings, board meetings, and ministry leader forums). If a spiritual formation emphasis is embodied and communicated by all levels of leadership in the local church (board, pastors, directors, volunteers), over time, the church culture will become a ripe environment that fosters spiritual growth.

Many senior pastors want to preach on creative, interesting, and, let's face it, obscure texts and topics that people will applaud for originality. I have been guilty of this. However, communicating the vision for spiritual growth means getting back to basics. It doesn't mean there won't be some original, creative, and interesting ideas and applications presented in the weekend messages. However, the goal will be to present a clear process, plan, program, and, most importantly, theology for spiritual growth. A *sermon series* at different points in the church year on topics like prayer, fasting, giving, serving, bible study, fellowship, to name a few, could go a long way in helping people grow up spiritually.

Weekend sermons are not the only way to communicate a vision for spiritual growth. It might be helpful to start up some *growth groups* of 10-12 people that will focus on the theme of the weekend message. You can also invite your church to participate in a one year "through the bible" reading plan, with a church blog, Twitter, or Facebook account for people to share what they are learning and living from the Bible. These spiritual exercises can build loosely connected congregants into an intimate community of people who help each other experience Christian formation and growth. Adding this horizontal component (i.e., person to person) to our Christian formation will allow us to experience tripolar spirituality. In his book, *Dissident Disciple*, David Augsburger describes tripolar spirituality as having the following three dimensions: "it is inwardly directed, upwardly compliant, and outwardly committed" (13). If we are going to be "outwardly committed" we must nurture the spiritual growth of others and invite them to do the same for us.

There are still other important and compelling tools to help in the communication of this vision for Christian growth. *Bulletins, emails, and newsletters* might include testimonies and video interviews from your people, as well as quotes from saints past and present, on topics integral to spiritual growth.

Implementing the Vision for Spiritual Growth

The vision casting for spiritual growth will fall far short of creating a culture of growth unless church leaders also develop and implement a thoughtful, specific, and long-term strategy to actually assist people through the process of growth. This section will outline a specific strategy to help people who catch the vision and want to grow inwardly in character, upwardly toward God, and outwardly toward others. The goal is to create a variety of experiences, beyond the weekend worship gathering, through which people can become "mature" in Christ.

It is my conviction that people grow most not merely through worship and preaching, but by learning and experiencing the practice of Christ's presence in all facets of life. In other words, we grow most in Christ through the daily, hands-on application of what we learn through Scripture, prayer, and people so that every "present moment is like a desert in which simple souls see and rejoice only in God, being solely concerned to do what He asks them" (DeCausade 9-

10). Surveys often reveal that the most influential experience in a teenager's spiritual growth does not typically occur while the youth pastor is teaching or the band is playing, but while the teenager is engaged in some kind of service by living kingdom values hands-on and experiencing the presence of Christ through the embodiment of those values.

Helping people grow spiritually, then, involves not just information-transfer but *experience-facilitation*. Far too often, church leaders have sought to help Christians grow simply through the transfer of biblical and doctrinal information. Perhaps church leaders today should not neglect asking the question, What information does a person need to grow in Christ? However, information acquisition alone will not help a person grow, a fact many churches are discovering to their dismay. The main question for leaders to ask when developing a strategy to help people grow spiritually is, What *experiences* can the church facilitate, beyond the worship gathering, to help people grow in Christ?

One of the premier ways that Christians grow, as suggested by the youth survey mentioned above, is through *Christian service*. When people, young or old, "role up their sleeves" and seriously address the needs of the world with the compassion, courage, and commitment of Christ they grow. Plan several national or global mission trips each year. Connect your people with community service opportunities through groups like Big Brother/Big Sister, Habitat for Humanity, and the Salvation Army, to name a few. As people apply the information they know about Christ in practical ways to serve others they will actually experience Christ in profound, enriching, and formative ways.

A possible, and often overlooked, strategy to assist people in their Christian growth is the development of a *spiritual formation mentoring ministry*. You can surely come up with a better name for this. Many people these days are hiring and paying lots of money for "life development coaches" to assist them in reaching their career potential. Why not have free "coaching" in the local church for people who want to reach their spiritual potential? The premier challenge in the implementation of this strategy would be the selection and training of coaches. This challenge should be insightfully addressed in the strategic plan for spiritual growth. Will a training curriculum be purchased or developed? What are the criteria for potential coaches? How will those wanting a spiritual growth coach engage in the process? How long will the coaching process last? There are many questions to address in the strategizing of this ministry, but a ministry like this could have a huge impact on the culture of growth that develops in your church.

Again, many people are hiring coaches these days to facilitate growth in their professional life and leadership development. How much more important is it for Christians to connect with Christ for growth? In my experience, people grow most when there is someone who helps them to navigate the bends in the road of the Christian life. This really was the purpose of John Wesley's class meetings and bands. Those groups provided accountability, guidance, and encouragement for people wanting to grow in their Christian development.

Another possible strategy for spiritual growth in your church is a *spiritual retreat*. This, of course, sounds easier than it really is. People are busy and the discretionary time they manage to squeeze out of their schedule is usually reserved for family and friends. A retreat must be well worth the expense of money and time. Do whatever it takes to get people to this spiritual growth retreat. Bribe them with food if you must. When they come, the retreat had better deliver or they won't come back the following year. Depending on your budget, try to underwrite some of the

cost for people who want to attend. If it makes sense in your context, invite an outside speaker with a solid reputation for helping people grow up spiritually. A retreat can be life changing for people, even if it is only 2-3 days out of the year.

On the heels of the retreat, you may want to start some *spiritual formation discussion groups* that will focus on books written by spiritual growth gurus like Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Eugene Peterson, Henry Nouwen, or John Ortberg, to name a few. God has used these authors and their writings to stir up a hunger and give me a strategy for my own growth in Christ.

Sustaining the Vision for Spiritual Growth

One of the questions church leaders will need to consider is, how will we provide continued leadership in order to sustain this commitment to the spiritual growth of all people in our local church? My suspicion is that if the intentional plan outlined above, or something like it, is repeated year to year then spiritual formation will become a major part of your church culture. This is not to say that you won't monitor whether or not what you are doing is really helping people to grow. Well-crafted *surveys and intentional conversations* with your people will help you evaluate and modify your process for spiritual formation.

There is another way to sustain this commitment to spiritual growth beyond just persistent and honest evaluation. *Identify and empower people* with the gifts and passion to help others grow spiritually to use their gifts in substantial ways. My hunch is that as you implement a plan for spiritual formation, people will begin to surface who may have new and better ideas to assist Christians in their growth. The deliberate and consistent infusion of new thinkers and implementers will help sustain a culture of spiritual growth over time.

In reality, the major key to your church's sustained commitment to spiritual formation is the extent to which *leaders such as staff, board members, and ministry directors embody and promote* the importance of Christian growth. "As go the leaders so goes the church" is a ministry maxim most would affirm. Marjorie J. Thompson says it better. She writes, "it is deeply damaging to the church and its members to suppose that we can transform the world if we are unwilling to be transformed personally....what hope have we to offer, what new life do we witness to, if our own hearts are not being made new by God" (16). In light of this reality, the senior leadership team will want to invest the time and energy needed to help present and emerging leaders develop their spiritual muscles.

Conclusion

The root obstacle to all Christian formation is either the pride that says we have arrived or the defeatism that suggests we can't grow. Thomas Merton, the twentieth century monk who spent most of his vocational years writing from the Abbey of Gethsemane in Kentucky, addressed both of these obstacles in his writings. Merton writes:

In one sense we are always travelling, and travelling as if we did not know where we were going. In another sense we have already arrived. We cannot arrive at the perfect possession of God in this life, and that is why we are travelling and in darkness. But we already possess Him by grace, and therefore in that sense we have arrived and are dwelling in the light. But oh! How far I have to go to find you in Whom I have already arrived (Shannon 134).

Spiritual formation, as Merton suggests, begins when we find ourselves on the right road to Christ but realize there is so much more of the road to experience. Convincing Christians of this

reality on a continual basis and embodying it will, I hope, sustain the vision and strategy toward spiritual formation in the local church you lead.

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