

NORTH PARK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
CENTER FOR SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IN THE CONTEXT OF  
CHURCH REVITALIZATION

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Many churches are faced with the necessity of revitalization. Cultural shifts, postmodernism, technological advancements and society's pressure to embrace pluralism are real issues that face church leaders today. Combined with the inherent proclivity of congregants to resist change, these realities contribute to social and theological tensions that enmesh church leaders.

Trend lines reveal that in many Evangelical denominations, church attendance and finances are declining. Church leaders face difficult decisions: "What ministries do we discontinue? How will we finance the necessary repairs of our facilities? What changes must we make to attract new families into the life of our church? How can we encourage our people to understand that change is necessary? How will we assist them to embrace the changes needed?" And the list goes on!

The purpose of this paper is not to provide another methodology for church leaders struggling with declining and dying churches. It is not intended to outline numerous revitalization models that are currently available for churches seeking renewal. My desire is to address the importance of spiritual direction in the context of church revitalization.

First, I will define spiritual direction as I see it in the context of church revitalization. Next, I will recount a few examples from Scripture how biblical leaders incorporated a form of spiritual direction in times of uncertainty, confusion, and when renewal was essential. Finally, I will offer some recommendations for church leaders to consider in their desire to make spiritual direction a viable process in church revitalization.

Having served in various church leadership roles I have witnessed a number of parishioners who had been involved with spiritual direction. Periodically, I would be asked to provide pastoral counseling to some of these individuals who were -- or had been -- involved in spiritual direction. Some seemed to have benefited from their sessions with a director. They appeared to be more in tune with God, more discerning, less stressed, and they seemed -- in general -- to handle life with a more positive demeanor and temperament. Their relationship with God had become stronger, deeper, and more intimate.

However, I also have observed that others had become confused with their faith. In offering pastoral care I became aware of how some had been influenced by polytheistic and pantheistic teachings. It appeared that Eastern and New Age influences had infiltrated their core belief of spirituality, bringing confusion to their Christian faith.

Over time, I realized that the term "spiritual direction" has many faces and definitions. I have witnessed the positive -- and negative -- aspects of spiritual direction. Because of the spiritual wounds and confusion experienced by some of my congregants, my approach with spiritual direction has been slow and tentative. Yet, despite the potential land mines concealed in the broad term of "spiritual direction", I believe that "Christian spiritual direction" is essential for church leaders and congregations seeking revitalization.

If churches are to see spiritual direction as a necessary ingredient for church vitality, then a proper definition is essential. The premise of spiritual direction (from a Christian perspective) is that God is active in every aspect of

our lives. Often, when churches are in a losing season, it is common to ask: “Where is God?” Church leaders are prone to sense the absence of God, more than God’s presence. Yet, spiritual direction underscores that God is not only present, but He is active in our relationships, emotions, work, leisure, uncertainties, weakness, wholeness, success and failure.

Spiritual direction does not happen by osmosis. It requires an intentional act on our part. By purposefully taking time to wait with God with our questions, we discover that gradually our sensitivity to God’s presence is heightened, our sense of safety is increased, and we are freed to become honest with God and others.

The ministry of spiritual direction opens our ears to hear with accuracy, our minds to comprehend God’s movement within, and our hearts to receive refreshment, compassion, and encouragement in a confidential setting of prayer.

The equipped director facilitates a process in which the stories of church leaders and congregants can be shared openly, yet sacredly. In this safe and confidential environment we become aware of pain and joy, confusion and certainty, discouragement and encouragement and... we begin to recognize that God is with us! Clarity gradually emerges, compassion is extended, and comfort, strength, and hope is experienced. In spiritual direction church leaders and congregants become aware of the presence and work of God’s spirit.<sup>1</sup>

The goal for those who enter spiritual direction is to discover and enter into an intimate relationship with God. This can – at times – be intimidating.

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<sup>1</sup> Summarized from the *Statement of Spiritual Direction*, (North Park Seminary, Chicago, IL, accessed March 18, 2010); available from: <http://www.northpark.edu/Seminary/Centers/Center-for-Spiritual-Direction/Statement-on-Spiritual-Direction.aspx>; Internet.

However, for those willing to press through their fears, spiritual direction opens them to God's care and skill... allowing Him to transform their lives and churches; assisting them in becoming the persons and church He created them to be in Jesus Christ.

William Barry and William Connolly offer a well-defined definition of spiritual direction in the opening chapter of their book: The Practice of Spiritual Direction.<sup>2</sup> A condensed summary might read: "Spiritual direction is the fostering of union with God by means of helping others pay attention to their experiences in prayer." Nowhere in this summation is it indicated that the purpose of spiritual direction is to solve problems. I believe this is a fundamental difference between spiritual direction and counseling. In the context of church revitalization, I define spiritual direction and its goal as:

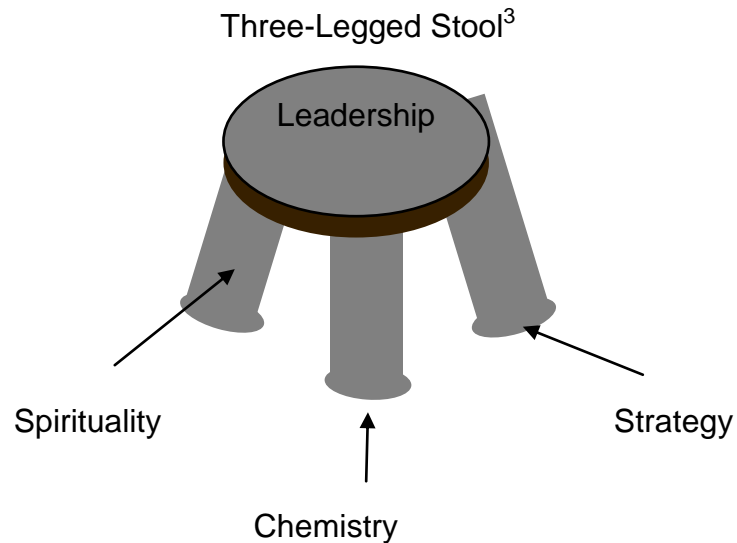
"An intentional act to listen, discern, accept, and enjoy God's presence. We do this by waiting with God and our questions in a safe place that frees us to become honest with God and others. The goal of spiritual direction is intimacy with God. The desired result is transformation; becoming the people and church He wants us to be in Christ Jesus."

Faced with the reality of declining numbers and finance, church leadership (typically) is not content to wait with God. Usually, by the time leaders identify that change must take place, the fear of potential death sparks desperation and desperation frequently breeds frenetic activity. After all, when your church desperately needs answers, discovering solutions appears to be more of a priority than finding solitude. However, renewal begins with spiritual direction.

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<sup>2</sup> William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 3-12.

In a recent conversation with Alan Forsman, Leadership and Congregational Coach with the Evangelical Covenant, he shared with me an image frequently used with leaders seeking renewal for their congregations.



This visual example is not only to identify three essential steps in church renewal, but also to prioritize them. Without adequate time allocated for spiritual direction, leadership is tempted to pursue methodology and seek church revitalization models before pursuing God.

What church leader would not herald this first leg as the appropriate and essential starting place? What religious leader would say: “No, let’s not take time with God. Let’s launch out and find the immediate solutions we need to turn our church around”? Yet, too often, our actions do not match our words. Finding the right chemistry mix with our leadership, re-defining our vision and mission statements, developing a new “look” (something more contemporary,

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<sup>3</sup> Dave Olson, Executive Minister of Church Growth and Evangelism, (The Evangelical Covenant Church, Chicago, IL).

appealing and inviting), finding new strategies, etc., appeal to our nature to “do”, rather than “be”.

Somehow we rationalize that God is delighted that we are doing something. We seek to convince ourselves that God must be pleased to see our commitment, our passion and desire to see our church have an impact in our community. Although these are important and necessary processes in church revitalization, without the commitment to wait with God first (a process that cannot be rushed), all of our ingenuity and efforts may be for naught.

Waiting with God – especially when we are uncertain and desperate -- can be acutely painful. Spiritual direction will – in time – reveal our interior motives. It will confront our faith and insist upon our allegiance to God alone. Spiritual direction demands that we “Be still and know that [God is] God” (Psalm 46:10). Despite the painful part of this process, it is also copious with refreshment, wisdom, clarity, comfort, and confidence. In time, we discover how much God loves and cares for us... despite our success or failure. This reality frees us to respond to God’s direction and releases us from the temptation to perform. True revitalization is impeded without an intentional commitment from church leaders and parishioners to embrace spiritual direction.

Churches seeking revitalization would do well to wrestle with some important questions: “Do we really believe God is active and present in our struggle? Are we willing to accept God’s presence in our uncertainty, confusion, and impatience? Are we being honest with God? Or, is finding solutions a

distraction that keeps us from discovering deeper spiritual issues that God may be asking us to address?”

Spiritual direction – in the context of church revitalization – reminds us: God is more interested in our intimacy than our initiative. This is not to imply that there is not a need for action. However, activity that precedes waiting with God frequently distracts us from matters of grave importance. The spiritual vitality of a congregation is important to God. Spiritual direction serves to remind us that “being with God” must always precede our “doing for God.”

Church leaders seeking revitalization would also do well to observe the narratives of Scripture that point to the importance of spiritual direction.

Fundamental to the Christian faith is the premise that God – Creator of heaven and earth – longs to reveal himself to humankind. Through sacred Scripture, we hear the story – from Genesis to Revelation – of how God reveals himself. Transcending space and time, the biblical narrative remains contemporary, offering inspiration, hope, encouragement, and wisdom for individuals and communities – throughout the centuries – and today.

Our own Covenant fathers guarded the belief that God reveals Himself through Scripture. Frequently, when faced with perilous challenges (personally or corporately), the question was asked: “Where is it written?” They viewed Scripture as the sole authority for our faith, doctrine, and conduct... a trustworthy compass to guide us when we lose our way.

Holy Scripture is replete with examples of leaders who sought (or who were led into) solitude with God to discover direction. Here are a few illustrations worth reviewing.

“Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.”<sup>4</sup>

A quick review of this narrative reminds us that it was an impulsive act by Moses that had required him to flee for his life (Exodus 2). Approximately forty years later, God reveals himself to Moses at a burning bush. Moses was intrigued as to why the bush was not consumed, and he turns aside to observe. God saw that Moses – not only saw – but that he had turned aside to observe. In that moment, the desert soil became Holy ground!

Moses’ curiosity compelled him to inquire. His intentional act to discover led to an encounter with God. The story continues with a lengthy dialogue between God and Moses where interior issues of fear, resistance, “what ifs”, and a sense of inadequacy are processed between Moses and God. What might have been missed, had Moses not turned aside to inquire?

First Kings 17 reveals the mighty works of the prophet Elijah. His prophetic words were accurate and miracles were taking place. In chapter 18, he is bold to confront King Ahab, resulting in a showdown with 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Elijah’s triumph results in the slaying of the false prophets. This wonderful victory for God immediately meets the fury and resistance of

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<sup>4</sup>The Holy Bible: *New Revised Standard Version*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Exodus 3:1-4.

Queen Jezebel, and Elijah runs with fear! Elijah is discouraged and convinced he is the only one that stands for of God. Alone, hiding on the mountain, Elijah hears God:

“... Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake;<sup>12</sup> and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”<sup>5</sup>

The voice of God is often loudest in silence. Spiritual conflict drains us emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Those who have been in Christian leadership for more than a short time, recognize that yesterday’s accomplishments are short lived. They are often taxing to our souls, and failure to be intentional in finding solitude with God, encourages spiritual fatigue and renders us impotent.

Despite his dramatic conversion, the mighty acts of Paul were preceded by solitude in the Arabian wilderness (Galatians 1:17). Jesus recognized the importance of periodically removing himself from ministry activity and people to find solitude (Matthew 14:13, 23).

These are only a few examples that can be considered to help remind us of the importance of incorporating a discipline that fosters spiritual direction in our lives.

So what can church leaders do to incorporate spiritual direction as an essential part of their revitalization process?

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid - 1 Kings 19:11-13.

First, it is essential for leadership to become pro-active in fostering an intimate relationship with God... individually and corporately. The need for revitalization must not distract us from cultivating intimacy with God. Unless spiritual direction becomes a priority, demonstrated to the congregation by leadership, impulsive actions may interrupt the discerning process... ultimately delaying the spiritual renewal we desire.

It is my opinion that churches seeking revitalization would do well to enlist the leadership of a qualified and trained spiritual director, someone outside of the local church.<sup>6</sup> One of the primary reasons is an outside director is able to listen without bias. He or she is not influenced by the emotional and personal dynamics that may be present.

Also, an outside director is less distracted by a sense of desperation, but intent upon reminding others that their role is not to find solutions but to facilitate a process that will foster a union with God for church leaders and congregants.

In addition, he or she has considerable training in spiritual direction and is capable of drawing from various modalities that may be appropriate at given circumstances (i.e., would lectio divina, contemplative prayer, or an Ignatian model be best suited for this particular setting?). Their experience and practice have equipped them to demonstrate various models in which local church teams (committees) can incorporate spiritual direction as an intentional practice in their meetings, thus reinforcing the belief that spiritual direction is a priority for the church, as well as encouraging the process.

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<sup>6</sup> Note: The Center for Spiritual Renewal (North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, IL) may serve as a good resource to locate qualified directors.

An outside person – skilled as a spiritual director and recognized by the Church because of their gifts, calling, and equipping – is often viewed as trustworthy (an important requirement for spiritual direction). They are viewed as a safe source, in which confidentiality will be honored. Barry & Connolly suggest that the kinds of men and women most likely to engender trust in others are men or women who are...

“...not perfect, but they are relatively mature. They show signs of having engaged in life and with people. They are optimistic, but not naïve, good-humored, but not glad-handers. They have suffered, but not been overcome by suffering. They have loved and been loved and know the struggle of trying to be a friend to another. They have friends for whom they care deeply. They have experienced failure and sinfulness – their own and others’ – but seem at ease with themselves in a way that indicates an experience of being saved and freed by a power greater than the power of failure and sin. They are relatively unafraid of life with all its light and darkness, all its mystery.”<sup>7</sup>

Spiritual direction is predicated upon the belief that God desires to reveal himself to us – even when we’re stuck. It underscores – with conviction – God is present and active in our lives and church. It is an important process that tunes our ears to hear God’s voice. Church leaders and congregants seeking revitalization recognize that the process is not always as clear, precise, and quick as we would like. However, it is this author’s belief that our desert of desperation can become holy ground as we cultivate an awareness of the importance of spiritual direction and incorporate this discipline as a priority in the church revitalization process.

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<sup>7</sup> Barry, William A. and Connolly, William J., *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 130