

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Do We Help People Grow Spiritually?

The most important question leaders of any organization can ask: "What business are we in?" In other words, "What exactly are we trying to accomplish?" (Peter Drucker)

What is the congregational answer to that question?

The short answer: Help people to grow spiritually.

A longer answer: Help people to make a spiritual connection that transforms their relationship with God and other people (Jesus's summary in Luke 10:27).

A more detailed answer: Involve people in spiritual growth experiences that (a) connect them with God, (b) heal emotional hurts, (c) build healthy personal values, (d) give them faith in God's guiding providence, and (e) encourage them to unselfishly care about their "neighbors."

If churches do *not* help people to grow spiritually, they (a) fail at their central reason for existing and (b) fail to effectively assimilate new members and attendees into active participation. Unless people feel a sense of spiritual growth, a church's efforts to provide group inclusion, friendly acceptance, and ministry roles are valuable but inadequate. Unless it facilitates spiritual growth, a church does little more than what a high quality civic club accomplishes.

What Is Spiritual Growth? Contemporary Americans use the term "spirituality" to describe a wide variety of beliefs and practices. Each "spiritual" idea—from Ouegi Boards, to reincarnation, to the spiritual guide of a movie actress, to Western Hinduism, to Yogi, to transcendental meditation—is a way of connecting with supernatural power outside the normal range of human experience, in order to enrich life and living.

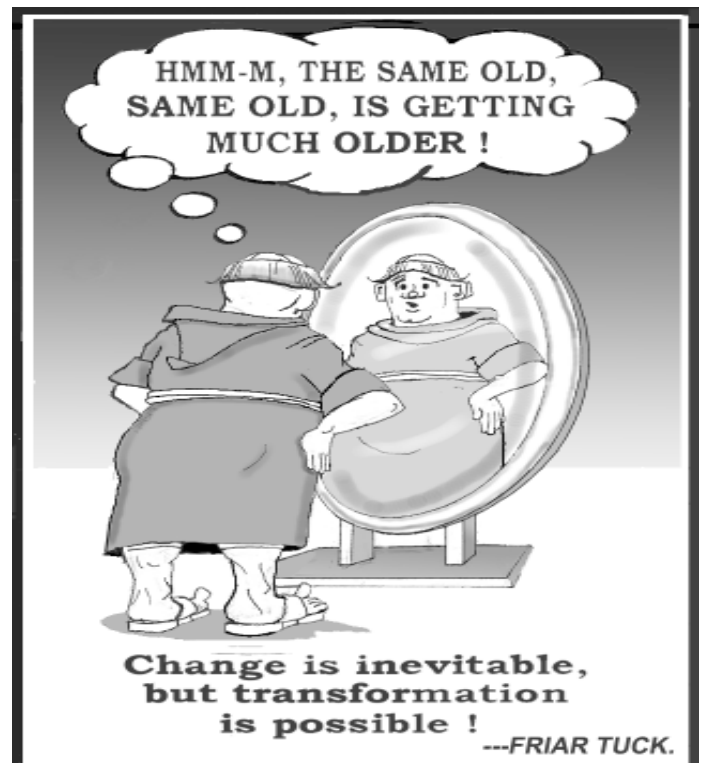
"Christian spirituality," by contrast, focuses on connecting with a specific type of supernatural power. The Apostle Paul put it this way: "Have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). In another letter, Paul defined spiritual growth like this: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5).

Christ is the foundation for "Christian spirituality." Various types of mysticism and other world religions stand on other foundations. *Christian* spirituality builds on the foundation of what *Christ* was, said, and did—on *Christ's* thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

What Does Spiritual Maturity Look Like in People?

The objective of "spiritual growth" is movement toward "spiritual maturity"—*having the mind of Christ*. Research indicates that spiritually mature people have nine qualities that set them apart from other people:

1. They are much more likely to have a daily time of private prayer.
2. They feel a genuine sense of the presence of God in their lives.
3. They report that their religious experiences are a source of strength, personal growth, and the healing of inner conflicts.
4. They tend to have a greater sense of inner peace, to feel more joyful and happy, and are less likely to feel depressed.
5. They are more humble, less likely to exhibit an inflated sense of self-importance.
6. They are far more often engaged in compassionate helping acts to others.
7. They are less racially prejudiced.



8. They are far more capable of forgiving people who wrong them and of being constructive, reconciling members of society.

9. They are more favorable to church involvement in political activity in order to right wrongs in society.

(George Gallup, Jr. and Timothy Jones, *The Saints Among Us* [Ridgefield, CT: Morehouse Publishing])

Summary: Spiritual maturity has three principle results: People (a) find their emotional hurts being healed, (b) develop a healthy personal value system that influences the way they treat other people, and (c) feel the peace and power of faith in God's guiding providence.

What Causes Spiritual Growth? Research indicates that people grow spiritually through fourteen experiences. Different people cite different experiences as number one among those fourteen. However, the majority of Christians identify the following seven experiences as their primary source of spiritual growth:

1. Worship—focusing on God and sensing God's presence
2. Music—feeling moved to give God greater attention
3. Prayer—relating to God
4. Fellowship—receiving God's love through others
5. Preaching—hearing God speak to me
6. Service—giving God's love to others through time and talent
7. Stewardship—giving money to help with God's work in the world

(Herb Miller, *Connecting with God* [Nashville: Abingdon Press])

Note: This book contains a "Spiritual-Growth Opinion Poll," and permission to use it. This survey allows pastors to (a) learn how their members experience spiritual growth, and (b) detect blind spots—spiritual-growth facilitators that are not important to them personally—but *are* important to their parishioners.

Some surprising insights from that research:

■ Laypeople rank "Fellowship" as a much more important source of spiritual growth than do clergy. Does not this "red-flag data" warn clergy that facilitating fellowship is a more important leadership task than they tend to believe?

■ This data helps us to see why the small-group movement is so helpful in facilitating spiritual growth. Various types of small groups are the spiritual-growth equivalent of adult Sunday school classes in the pre-1928 era. Small groups create a fellowship environment that encourages several of those critically important spiritual-growth experiences.

Spiritual Growth via Small Groups: Congregations involve people in small groups in numerous ways. Examples:

□ People experience spiritual growth in the wide variety of "classic" small groups provided by the typical congregation, such as the following:

1. *Learning Groups:* Bible study groups, Sunday school classes, Managing Your Money Classes, and Parenting Groups.

2. *Praying Groups:* Women's Prayer Groups, Men's Prayer Breakfasts, and Pastor's Prayer Partners.

3. *Relating Groups:* Senior Adult Groups, Youth Groups, Young Mothers' Clubs, Singles Ministries, and College Groups.

4. *Serving Groups:* Helping Hand Groups and Weekly Property Care Groups.

5. *Supporting Groups:* Grief Recovery Groups and Divorce Recovery Groups.

6. *Caring Groups:* Care Corps Shepherding Ministries, Twelve-Step Groups, and Crisis Care Teams.

7. *Growing Groups:* Covenant Discipleship Groups and Accountability Groups.

□ Another approach is the model developed by Rick Warren at Saddleback Valley Community Church in California. Visit the <https://www.pastors.com/pcom/class/Website> for detailed information regarding that model.

□ Still another approach (most often seen in newly formed churches) is the shift from a traditional church organization model to the meta-model that breaks members into small groups of ten-to-twelve people that meet weekly or biweekly. Ginghamburg United Methodist Church, near Dayton, Ohio, offers annual workshops that illustrate how to develop and use the meta-model; for dates, visit the www.ginghamsburg.org Website.

Summary: Change is inevitable in human beings. Transformation is optional. Many Christians report that the fellowship they find in small-group experiences is a major transformation facilitator.*

The Bottom Line. The young man in an old Hebrew story wanted to become a blacksmith. He went through the laborious process of apprenticeship to master the techniques of that trade. He learned how to hold the tongs, how to smite the anvil, and how to work the bellows. After finishing his training, he found a job at the palace blacksmith shop. But his skills at using the tools turned out to be of little value. He had never learned how to kindle the spark!

The most blessed of people—through their Christ relationship—connect with spiritual power.

Does our congregation help people to kindle that spark?

*Herb Miller's *Nuggets*, Volumes #7, "How to Build Assimilation Bridges for New Members/Attendees," provides numerous additional spiritual-growth methods and detailed how-to-do-it suggestions. E-mail HrbMiller@aol.com for a free contents-descriptions and an order form (sent only in response to E-mail request, NOT in response to U.S. Mail, FAX, or telephone requests).

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