

**Being Transformed and Transformative:
An Approach to Personal Spiritual Formation
For Christian Educators**

**A Presentation for The Spiritual Formation Network
At the National Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly
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Greetings

- First, I would like to thank Amy Jennings for her kind introduction. Amy and her husband, David, were students at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, back in the day when I was a graduate assistant to Dr. Ronnie Prevost. Amy was in several of the Christian education classes for which I graded and both Amy and David were members of the church that I served at the time, Melbourne Heights Baptist Church. It was also a privilege to reconnect with Amy and David at the Gathering of Baptists and Others Interested in Spirituality at Camp Caraway in 1997.
- I would also like to acknowledge Amy and Howard Williams, Christian educator at Weatherly Baptist Church in Huntsville, Alabama, for their leadership in coordinating the network and for organizing this event.
- Next, I want to congratulate Rick Bennett on the recent completion of his doctor of ministry degree and to thank him for his work as CBF staff liaison with the Spiritual Formation Network.
- Finally, I want to thank the persons in attendance at the luncheon for their interest in spiritual formation in the congregational context.

Overview of the Presentation

Take a moment to provide an overview of the presentation:

- This presentation will begin with a description and an assessment of the processes that Baptists in the Southern context have used to encourage Christian faith and maturity. These processes can best be described as “a programmed piety.”
- Next, I will describe a significant transition that is occurring in the moderate Baptist context. With regard to Christian faith and maturity, many moderate Baptists are shifting from this “programmed piety” to an emphasis on personal and corporate spiritual formation.
- Then, I want to suggest some practical advice about what you, as congregational leaders in the area of Christian education, and I, as a facilitator of Christian education in an institutional context, can navigate through this time of transition.

- Finally, I want to challenge each person present to implement one or more of these suggestions in his or her place of service and ministry.

This is my goal for our time together: if you can find one idea or one practice that you can implement next week in your own life, in the life of your family, or in your ministry context, then I will consider our time together as a success.

A Programmed Piety

For the last half of the 20th century, Southern Baptists perfected an approach to Christian faith and maturity that my friend, Linda M. Givens, described as “a programmed piety.”¹ What do I mean by “a programmed piety”? For Baptists of the South, maturity in Christ has been nurtured and facilitated through participation in:

1. Church Program Organizations,
2. A Regular Schedule of Church-Based Events, and
3. Simple Acts of Personal Piety.

Church Program Organizations

Back in the heyday of Southern Baptist denominational influence, any Baptist seeking authentic relationship with and growth in Christ attended church program organizations:

- On Sunday mornings, we attended Sunday School. The Sunday School was a lay-led organization which included a series of age-graded classes in which all members of the church and potential members were invited to study the Bible. These classes were facilitated by curriculum materials produced by the denominational publishing house (to guarantee doctrinal integrity).
- On Sunday evenings, we attended an additional program known by various names—Baptist Young Peoples Union, Training Union, Church Training, and Discipleship Training. This program also included age-graded classes in which we study Christian theology, church history, Baptist polity, and ethics. We also learned basic skills associated with the Christian life—how to memorize and find scripture passages, how to witness, how to lead church groups, etc.
- If you were Baptist and female, you were naturally a part of Women’s Missionary Union (WMU), a mission organization for preschoolers, girls, and women. If you were an adult, you were, most likely, a part of a mission circle in which you studied about, prayed for, and supported Southern Baptist mission efforts all over the world.
- If you were Baptist and male, you were a part of The Brotherhood, a mission organization for boys and men. The emphasis in this organization was fellowship and missions action.
- If you were musically inclined (and sometimes if you were not), you were a part of the Music Program. During this period, Southern Baptists developed a program of music education and age-graded choirs that was quite impressive.

¹ The term, “a programmed piety,” was derived from the title of Dr. Givens dissertation, **A Programmed Piety: Education for Spirituality in Southern Baptist Study Course Literature 1908-1986**. This dissertation may be accessed through the library of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

Church-Based Events

In addition to participation in these church program organizations, faithful Southern Baptists were strongly encouraged to attend a number of other church-based events.

- True Baptists attended two worship services on Sunday, morning and evening. (Note: this pattern of worship developed in the rural Southern context in a time when a church had access to a “preacher” only one Sunday per month. To best utilize the services of these circuit-riding preachers, a church would hold two worship services on that Sundays when the preacher was in town.)
- On Wednesday nights, in addition to meet for missions and music classes, Baptists gathered for prayer meeting. The faithful would gather to pray for the personal needs, congregational needs, and community needs (intercessory prayer).
- Based on the rhythm of the rural, agricultural South, many Baptist churches offered two, week-long revivals each year: one in the spring after planting and one in the fall after harvest.
- In the summers, Baptist churches offered Vacation Bible Schools (sometimes two weeks long!), choir tours, and Christian camping activities.

Acts of Personal Piety

While participation in Church Program Organizations and attendance at church-based events were important, certain acts of personal piety were also considered vital for mature Southern Baptists.

- We were encouraged to have a “quiet time,” a daily time to read the Bible and to pray for family, friends, neighbors, missionaries, and the people of the world.
- A second act of piety was “witnessing” to “unsaved” people in your family, in your neighborhood, and in your community. As conservative evangelicals, the command to share the Gospel message compelled Southern Baptists to regularly share their faith.

Summary of This Section

If you were a Baptist who was desired to become a mature disciple of Jesus Christ, living in the South in 20th century, this process is probably very familiar to you. If you participated in all appropriate Church Program Organizations, if you attended preaching and other special events, and if you maintained the disciplines of a quiet time and witnessing, you would become a mature disciple of Jesus Christ.²

² After the presentation, one participant suggested that this process really represented a “rule of life” for Southern Baptists of this era. This was an excellent insight that will be further developed in this paper.

Personal Reflections on Programmed Piety

I must admit that this “programmed piety” was very much a part of my own spiritual pilgrimage. I have fond memories of the experiences and the people associated with these activities.

- I remember reading my Sunday School lesson on Saturday night. I also remember sitting with my father and brothers as we polished our dress shoes for Sunday morning.
- I remember putting a dime in my offering envelope and completing the “7 Point Record”³ on the front of the envelope.
- I remember participating in Bible Drill led by our pastor’s wife, Mrs. Ruby Hicks. In this program, the children and youth of the church memorize scripture and learned how to find passages in the Bible. To this day, I still can recite the books of the Bible, in order.
- Once a year, the Royal Ambassadors (the mission group for boys) were invited to attend the Brotherhood Breakfast. I would go to church very early on Sunday morning to help my father as he cooked breakfast and then would fall asleep during the mission “program.” Later, I became an RA leader, and then later, I was the church staff member responsible for Baptist Men.
- I was a member of children’s and youth choirs in my church. I sang and acted in several youth musicals and ensembles. My first worship leadership experience came when I was the narrator for the musical, *If My People*, a celebration of the nation’s Bicentennial.
- As a child, I resented having to go to Training Union and evening worship on Sunday nights while all of my Methodist friends got to watch *The Wonderful World of Disney* on television.
- I remember saying the pledges to the flags and to the Bible during Vacation Bible School, and leading those same pledges when I became the church staff member who led VBS.
- I remember watching my mother sit in her rocking chair, reading *Open Windows* and praying through her prayer list.

This “programmed piety” was very formative for me...and I would image that it was also formative for many of the people in this room. Because it has been so formative for so many Baptists of in the Southern context, this approach is still used in most Southern Baptist church and in many moderate Baptist congregations.

Transitions

In the early twenty-first century context, moderate Baptists are now facing a major transition in our approach to and understanding of the processes associated with faith maturity and Christian discipleship.

I believe that this transition has been stimulated, in part, by two critical factors:

- The Programmed Piety Approach is falling apart. In short, from a pragmatic perspective, it no longer “works.”
- The Programmed Piety Approach was based on a limited set of theological and educational assumptions.

³ In this record system, a person got credit for studying one’s lesson, for reading the Bible each day, for tithing, for attending preaching, and participating in a number of other acts of devotion.

Examples of Pragmatic Problems with Programmed Piety

- Many conservative evangelicals have depended upon the Sunday School as the primary context in which to study the Bible. However, after the heyday of Sunday School in the 1950's, Sunday School attendance has decreased consistently. In many churches, the classrooms, methods, and approaches to Sunday School have not changed in decades. Although a few churches are using a number of creative approaches to resuscitate this ministry, my prediction is that, in 50 years, Sunday School as we know it will no longer exist.
- Most Baptist churches no longer offer a comprehensive discipleship training program, on Sunday evening or at any other time during the week. On occasion, a church, or a segment of the church, will participate in a short-term study (i.e. *Experiencing God, Forty Days of Purpose*, or a Beth Moore study), or some other “fill-in-the-blank” approaches to discipleship. In my opinion, these studies are, at best, superficial.
- The WMU has faced a number of challenges in recent decades, including declining participation, redefinition of its purpose, seismic shifts in mission support, and competition from various forms of “women’s ministries” now being offered through the denominational publishing house and various parachurch groups.
- Shifts in worship styles (i.e. the “worship wars”) have moved many churches away from graded choir programs to praise teams. In many contexts, hymnody is falling into obscurity as “praise choruses” are used to facilitate worship.
- Many churches no longer have Sunday evening worship services.
- Many churches no longer hold traditional revivals. If revivals are still included in the church’s program of activities, they are usually one or two-day events.

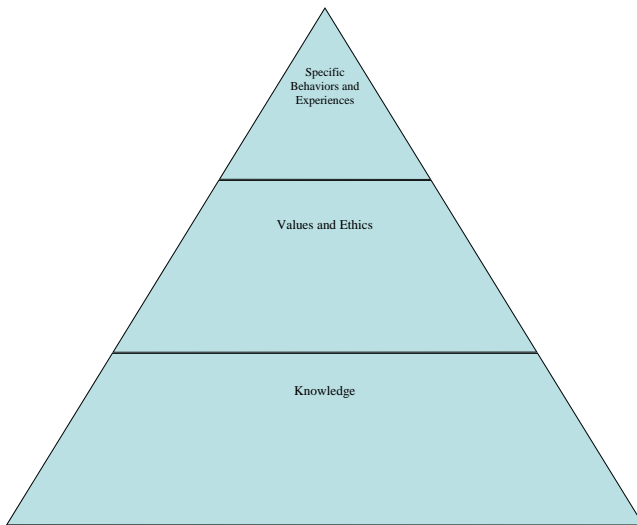
In summary, the patterns of programming (and their associated formational activities) develop for rural, agriculturally-oriented churches do not fit contemporary, suburban and urban congregational contexts, and yet many Baptists church work feverishly to maintain these traditional programs and patterns of piety.

Limited Theological and Educational Assumptions

These pragmatic concerns represent only one aspect of this transition in our approach to and understanding of the processes associated with faith maturity and Christian discipleship. The “programmed piety” approach to faith maturity was based on the assumption that **knowledge**, defined in terms of biblical facts and sets of theological statements, is the primary foundation for Christian formation. The program was based on the assumptions that:

- We can find specific **answers** to all questions of faith if we study the scriptures and agree on their interpretation and application.
- We can maintain **theological orthodoxy** if we claim basic Baptist principles and then apply these principles in matters of interpretation, ethics, and informed behavior.
- We are in “right relationship” with others only when we share a **common set of biblical and theological assumptions about matters of faith.**

From an educational perspective, the programmed piety approach may be demonstrated in terms of the triangle depicted below:



In this approach, correct knowledge serves as the basis for orthodox values and ethics, which in turn lead to acceptable behaviors and experiences.

In the Postmodern context, theologians and educators question the primacy of knowledge in matters of faith and discipleship. In the contemporary context, the importance of **relationships** (to God, to others, and to the world) and **experiences** (both personal and corporate) are becoming increasingly important in matters of faith and discipleship. In fact, relationship and experience have always been important in matters of faith.⁴

Spiritual Formation as a Guiding Paradigm of Christian Maturity

In the academic study of Christian education, the Programmed Piety Approach is consistent with the Religious Instruction paradigm of Christian education⁵. In Religious Instruction, the overarching goal of all activities associated with congregational education is to transmit Christian religion (defined in terms of understandings and practices) from one generation to the next. According to this approach, this process of transmission best takes place in the context of formal educational settings (such as the classes offered through the Church Program Organizations described in the first sections of this presentation). In these classes, the teacher is viewed as a “content expert,” i.e. a person who knows biblical content, uses appropriate interpretative frameworks, embraces orthodox doctrine, and

⁴ Reclaiming the relational and experiential components of faith is a major part of the “ancient-modern” dynamic at work in the educational approach of the National Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and in the emergent church movement.

⁵ For a more detailed description of the Religious Instruction and Spiritual Formation paradigms of Christian education, see Seymour and Miller, **Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education**, 1992.

describes acceptable practices derived from that doctrine. In its best expression, the teacher is also a “process expert,” a person who can guide the members of his or her class in the processes of theological reflection that lead to knowing, interpreting, living, and doing the faith. In this approach, the student is a recipient of this content and a participant in these processes. The approach is based on the assumption that, if the student participates in all of the appropriate classes (i.e. attends all of the appropriate Church Program Organization activities), then he or she will become a mature disciple of Jesus Christ.

In an attempt to embrace the importance of relationships and experiences in the development of Christian faith, many moderate Baptists, Baptist congregations, and other Baptist agencies are now turning to the Spiritual Formation paradigm of Christian education. In this approach, the overarching goal of all Christian education activities is to enable individuals and congregations to grow in faith to spiritual maturity. Although small groups and classes may be associated with this approach, the primary context for the spiritual formation approach is the total life of the maturing Christian; any setting where a person engages in relationships with others and has meaningful life experiences is a context for spiritual formation. In this approach, the learner is viewed as a person on a spiritual journey, moving through stages of development and phases of life on the path toward maturity in Christ. Here, the “teacher” serves more as a spiritual guide or sponsor. Finally, the processes associated with spiritual formation include silence, listening, Sabbath, study, and service in the name of Christ.

The shift from a “programmed piety” to spiritual formation has been a welcome change in some moderate Baptist congregations. It has been very difficult in many other Baptist churches. As previously stated, the processes associated with our programmed piety “worked” for so many years. Many Baptist educators and lay leaders believe that, if we could just put more effort into the old ways, that the educational crisis now evident in many congregations could be solved. Other educators and lay leaders simply have never experienced another way of facilitating Christian education in the church. Further, some educators and lay leaders are suspicious of the spiritual formation approach because its approach and methodologies are associated with other religious traditions. These people accuse proponents of the spiritual formation approach of “drinking from other wells.”

- The spiritual disciples associated with spiritual formation are questioned or dismissed as “too Catholic.”
- The emphasis on formal liturgy and the use of the Christian calendar as an organizing principle for worship and education is termed “too Episcopalian.”
- The focus on individual and corporate spiritual discernment is labeled as “too Quaker.”
- The use of curriculum materials produced by Cokesbury and Upper Room, materials which support the processes of spiritual formation, is termed “too Methodist.”

These suspicious and reservations have frustrated many Baptist Christian educators. These educators see the need for this transition in educational approach. But at the same time, the expectations associated with their work remain focused on criteria associated with the programmed piety approach. These educators are evaluated, not on how many people for whom they provided spiritual direction during a week, but rather on how many people attended Sunday School last week. They may wish to design transformative experiences for member of the congregation, but they are still required to recruit teachers and leaders for the various church program organizations and special events.

I believe that, over the course of the next few decades, addressing this shift from programmed piety to spiritual formation will be the major task of moderate Baptist Christian educators. Some educators will find receptive congregations who are more than ready to explore and develop a distinctively Baptist approach to spiritual formation. Other educators will work long and hard to facilitate this shift. Finally, some educators will serve congregations who are not open to these educational changes at all.

Given these different sets of circumstances, what can the moderate Baptist Christian educator who is dedicated to spiritual formation do?

Being Transformed and Transformative...

I believe that, as a Christian educator in a congregational context, the best gift that you can give your church family is to be attentive to your own spiritual formation, that is, to be transformed into the person that God has called you to be. As Christian educators in the congregational context, the goal is to become the presence of Christ in personhood, your family, your congregation, and in your community. And as you are personally transformed, you will be transformative in all areas of your life.

- You may not be able to change your church's approach to Sunday School, but you can learn how to be transformed through your own personal study of the scripture.
- You may not be able to change the way that your church does Prayer Meeting on Wednesday nights, but you can learn different types of ancient prayer practices that may be meaningful on your own spiritual pilgrimage.
- You may not be able to change the ways in which your church supports missions, but can develop the habit of doing acts of ministry and service in the name of Christ.

As you are transformed through processes of spiritual discipline and the ordering of time, you will be transformative in your world.

A Process of Spiritual Formation for Christian Educators⁶

The following activities and processes have been used by ministers and others who seek personal spiritual formation. They represent a "rule of life" for the Christian educator.

Daily Acts of Devotion

- Once or twice a day, we must spend 10-20 minutes in some acts of personal devotion.
- These periods of time can happen in the morning, at mid-day, or in the evening, based on your own personal preference.
- If a simple Bible reading and intercessory prayer are acts of devotion that are meaningful for you, then by all means use these methods.
- If these activities are no longer meaningful for you, there are a number of other ancient spiritual disciplines that may be helpful for you. (Note: Henri Nouwen defined a spiritual disciple as "any activity that opens you to God...") These include:

1. *Lectio Divina*
2. Ignatian Reflection on Scripture
3. Breathe Prayer
4. The Jesus Prayer
5. Centering Prayer
6. Praying or Meditating while walking or hiking
7. Walking the Labyrinth
8. Morning Pages (as describe by Julia Cameron in **The Artist's Way**)

⁶ An excellent resource describing the activities and processes described below is **Light for the Path: A Guide for Spiritual Formation Resources**. This resource guide was produced by the National Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and is available for purchase through the CBF Store at www.thefellowship.info or call 1.888.801.4223.

9. The Examen
10. Holy Reading

Weekly Retreats

- Each week, we should take a half-day “retreat”—2-3 hours in which we can expand our daily practices.
- Perhaps you can meet with a spiritual director, a spiritual guide, or a spiritual friend.
- Some people choose to meet regularly with a peer group that is interested in spiritual formation.
- You could do something as simple as fasting for half a day.

Monthly All-Day Retreats

- Once a month, replace the half-day experience with a full day “retreat,” focusing on some aspect of spiritual formation.
- It is best if you go away for this experience, in order to change your “normal” schedule of activities.
- *The Methodist Minister’s Manual* includes a number of outlines for such all-day retreats.
- Many retreat centers offer programs or consultation services to help you participate in a monthly retreat.

Annual Retreats

- Once a year, you should participate in a 3-4 day retreat experience (a retreat that you do not lead).
- The 5 Day Academy for Spiritual Formation, offered through the Upper Room, provides an excellent retreat experience.
- The Advent Center for Spirituality (located in Mars Hill, North Carolina) also hosts a retreat each summer.
- Each year, the National Cooperative Baptist Fellowship also sponsors a number of spirituality retreats for ministers.
- Again, retreat centers in your area schedule annual retreat experiences.

A Pilgrimage

- Every 7-10 years, you should participate in a spiritual pilgrimage, a period of intentional travel with a focus on spiritual formation. The idea of personal journey is reflected in the physical journey that is a part of this type of experience.
- In 2006, I participated in a Celtic pilgrimage, visiting holy sites in England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. The highlight of the experience was a 4-day visit to Iona.
- This pilgrimage might correspond to a sabbatical leave from your congregation, if your church offers this benefit.

Family Spiritual Formation

- It is important to remember that spiritual formation begins in the home. Home is “the forming center.” Any emphasis on personal spiritual formation must find expression in the context of family.

- As reported in the Search Institute Study on Effective Christian Education, one of the most important means through which to nurture a “vibrant, life-changing faith” are family religious practices. These practices included:
 1. conversations with one’s mother about her faith,
 2. conversations with one’s father about his faith,
 3. participation in regular family devotions (which may be facilitated by a number of excellent resources available through Cokesbury and Upper Room), and
 4. participation in family service projects.⁷
- You may also be able to modify some of the spiritual disciplines listed in the previous section of the presentation for use with children and adolescents in your family.
- If, like me, you are a single adult, you may choose to form “intentional families” or communities of other singles and/or couples. Such groups form a functional family that gather together for fellowship and support and participate in spiritual disciplines as a group.

Practical Expressions of the Contemplative

- Personal spiritual formation also finds expression in acts of service and ministry that benefit the community and the world.
- Some ministers may use one of the weekly half-day “retreat” experiences to participate in a service or ministry project, as an individual or with members of their family.
- If you are concerned about world hunger, you might choose to fast each week and donate the money that you would have spent on food to some reputable hunger organization. You might also choose to work in a food bank or cook at a homeless shelter.
- If you believe that education is important to personal development, you might choose to tutor a student each week.
- If you are concerned about the environment, you might pick up trash on a particular section of a highway, or you might choose to clean a wetland area.

The Challenge

My challenge to each person in this luncheon is that you will take one of the ideas or suggestions that I have shared today, and that you will implement this idea in your own spiritual journey.⁸

⁷ For more information about this study and its implications in the congregational context, read Foster, **Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education**, 1994.

⁸ Feedback regarding this presentation may be directed to the author at brocket@campbell.edu. You may also choose to visit the author’s website, www.christianeducationnetwork.org. A number of resources in the area of spirituality are offered at this site.