

2005

The Resource Page

... creative and practical ideas

Brought to you this month
by Phil Potratz



Spiritual growth beyond the beginnings

A friend of mine recently remarked that Baptists tend to be “a mile wide but only a few inches deep.” A number of national polls support this assessment when they reveal that in many categories the ethical behavior of Baptists varies little from that of their surrounding culture. We tend to do a good job of introducing people to Christ, but not as good a job of guiding them into the life transformation that growing intimacy with Christ should bring. A number of valid reasons can be given for this.

For example, the affluence of our culture creates many distractions. The American lifestyle is too rushed to take discipleship seriously. Our “fast food” culture expects instant results, and spiritual formation takes too long. All these reasons have some validity. However, the call to the church has always been to transform culture, not to be transformed by it.

I have always been amazed that Christ transformed culture by spending most of his time with only 12 people. His focus was not on large numbers, but on quality transformation. I think we would do well to follow his example. Following are some avenues I have found to be fruitful in encouraging genuine spiritual transformation within the church setting.

Be authentic in your spiritual life. More is “caught” from our example than is ever taught in formal teaching. We must be “on the journey” ourselves and be willing to acknowledge our struggles and questions along with our victories.

Promote small groups. In small groups, people share more openly and are more candid about their personal journeys. The relationships with group members and the commitment to the group itself create a level of accountability that can help

members grow in ways they would not grow on their own. Also, connections often happen that lead to further spiritual partnerships and one-on-one discipling.

Encourage accountability relationships. Coaching is growing rapidly in our culture because people recognize that accountability to someone else helps them to reach goals they cannot reach alone. Spiritual directors, mentoring relationships and small accountability groups are all profitable ways to encourage transformation.

Utilize retreats. Time away from our routine responsibilities provides opportunity to evaluate our priorities and see our lives with fresh eyes. It can also be key to taking time to hear God’s voice calling us toward growth.

Following are practical suggestions for applying these principles in church settings.

Schedule small group sessions for Sunday and/or Wednesday evenings. These do not all have to be long-term discipleship groups, but rather short-term and/or needs-based such as parenting classes, marriage enrichment, “Making Peace with your Past” and “First Place” (Christ-centered diet group). The key is for people to begin interacting honestly about their lives in a Christian context.

Create elective classes or a second “track” for Sunday school. Regular classes remain open to all, but elective classes can go deeper in commitment and the level of sharing.

Schedule periodic new member classes. These can be great opportunities for connecting with people and setting expectations of commitment to continued growth and service. Some churches even require completion of a class as a prerequisite to joining the church. This immediately creates a climate of greater accountability among members. **BT**

Small group resources

Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster (Harper & Row, 1978) — introduction to spiritual formation

Companions in Christ (Upper Room Ministries) — a nine-month spiritual formation group experience

Academy for Spiritual Formation (Upper Room Ministries) — retreats for laity and clergy

Individual study resources

Making Room for Life: Trading Chaotic Lifestyles for Connected Relationships by Randy Frazee (Zondervan, 2003).

Frazee gives an accurate description of the overextended, disconnected lifestyle our culture encourages and then suggests ways to simplify and enrich our lives. For example, cultivate social involvements that overlap naturally with other areas of your life and avoid those that exist in isolation, limit the number of extracurricular activities in which your children are involved, and focus on relationships that are in close proximity to work or home.

Connecting to God: Nurturing Spirituality through Small Groups by Corinne Ware (The Alban Institute, 1997).

Ware is well versed in a wide range of spiritual practices and resources. She believes our Western church traditions make us suited for nurturing spirituality through small groups, especially among extroverts who often have trouble with individualistic approaches typically suggested for spiritual formation. Ware offers a suggested group format for spiritual formation, including meeting structure and leadership tips. One chapter is devoted to an overview of books and resources available in the area of spirituality with suggestions for their use as part of a small group experience.

Stretch Out Your Hand: Exploring Healing Prayer by Tilda Norberg and Robert D. Webber (Upper Room Books, 1998).

Norberg and Webber discuss many of the modern stereotypes of healing prayer and clarify expectations related to it. They define healing in a holistic sense as encompassing not only our physical selves, but also our mind, spirit and emotions. After laying this basic groundwork, they give practical guidance for intercessory prayer and provide relevant examples of various forms of prayer and the healing that resulted. They conclude with suggestions on how churches can become healing communities.

THE RESOURCE PAGE is provided by the Congregational Life office of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in partnership with *Baptists Today* and for those dedicated lay leaders working in the educational ministries of local churches. This month’s page was written by Phil Potratz, minister of education at Immanuel Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn.