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The Resource Page

... creative and practical ideas

Brought to you this month
by Rick Bennett



Exploring Spiritual Formation

Spiritual formation is the process of being formed in the image of Christ by the gracious working of God's Spirit for the transformation of the world. It is about discipleship or becoming like Jesus, but not necessarily the ways Baptists have traditionally attempted to make disciples. The focus is more *formation* than information, more *process* than program and as much *Holy Spirit* as Holy Bible. Spiritual formation pays attention to heart, soul and body as well as mind.

In the spiritual formation approach the classic spiritual disciplines are the central means by which individuals place themselves within God's reach — like the potter and the clay. Through these disciplines the Holy Spirit works God's will in us — our conformation into the likeness of God's Son, Jesus being the firstborn among many siblings (Rom 8:28ff). As we are conformed to the image of Christ, we more fully become the presence of Christ. This transformation of character has potential for creating Kingdom reality and leads us to awareness of and participation in God's mission (2 Cor 2:17ff).

As Baptists learn more about spiritual formation, there is the inevitable struggle that comes with the advent of change and new ideas. Ministers and laypersons alike are asking, "Whatever happened to Christian education?" "How is spiritual formation different?" "Isn't spiritual formation Catholic?" These questions indicate the need for a careful approach to exploring and implementing a spiritual formation perspective in the Baptist congregation.

If your church is exploring spiritual formation, help your church understand that you have not eliminated Christian education. It is not in competition with spiritual formation, but rather an essential component of one's holistic spiritual formation. Knowing

the biblical story, theology, church history and the committing of scripture to memory has never been more important. Further, help connect the spiritual disciplines, a theology of the Holy Spirit and contemplative practices unfamiliar to Baptists to the early church. These disciplines, ideas and realities do not belong to Catholicism, but to the church.

The struggle for most congregants will be formational experiences with which they are not accustomed — formation experiences are quite a departure from the information-based Sunday school hour. So, start by recruiting a small group of persons who you sense want to go deeper. Covenant with one another to share your stories and to encourage one another along the journey using an intentional resource such as the ones listed below. Soon you will hear comments like, "This is what Sunday school should be like!" A vision for your ministry and church might be to provide a more balanced discipleship — information and formation.

Following are ideas for congregational spiritual formation:

- Start a Companions in Christ group.
- Teach people a new way of reading Scripture by hosting a weekly "Holy Reading" group during the Sunday school hour or another time.
- Offer an annual contemplative prayer retreat.
- Incorporate silence and various prayer forms into committee meetings.
- Create an intimate and inviting "sacred space" within your church and encourage its use.
- Be intentional about helping church members share their journeys with one another.
- Create opportunities for koinonia, not just fellowship. **BT**

RESOURCES

Companions in Christ (Upper Room Ministries, www.companionsinchrist.org), which started as a foundational 28-week Companions resource, is now available divided into five volumes and includes 6- to 10-week small group experiences. The latest pieces, *The Way of Pilgrimage* and *The Way of the Child*, focus on the spiritual formation of children, youth and young adults. Though training is not required to facilitate a Companions resource, it is meaningful. (Training is available at the CBF General Assembly. Register at the Companions website.)

Light for the Path: A Guide to Spiritual Formation Resources (www.thefellowship.info) offers an introduction to the concept of spiritual formation, a listing of personal and congregational resources (retreat places by state, opportunities for learning, an introduction to the labyrinth and spiritual friendship), a glossary of terms and a bibliography of devotional classics.

Bountiful Feast (www.thefellowship.info/involved/events/bountifulfeast.icm) is a gathering of persons interested in spiritual formation, and occurs every three years at CBF General Assembly.

Soul Feast (www.upperroom.org/soulfeast/), an annual event at Lake Junaluska, N.C., is a formation opportunity for the entire family.

The CBF Spiritual Formation Network Website will debut at this year's General Assembly. This web resource will serve as a hub for persons interested in spiritual formation, a place to find resources, relationships and direction. (To receive notification of this website's release and address, email rbennett@thefellowship.info.)

The Scriptures — Jeremiah 18, Jesus' spiritual formation in the Gospels, Romans 8, Romans 12, etc.

Robert Mulholland, Invitation to a Journey (www.ivpress.com)

Dallas Willard, Revolution of Character (www.navpress.com)

Connecting with God (www.renovare.org)

Learning from Jesus (www.renovare.org)

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