
Spiritual Formation and the Pastor: A Vision for Shortening the Distance between Pulpit and Pew

Stephen A. Macchia

It was 8 p.m. on Friday, after a long week of ministry, when our phone rang. Fran, an 87-year-old friend from church, had called because she needed a listening ear, some pastoral encouragement, and prayer. Fran is the mother of four grown children, all of whom are facing traumatic health issues, including spinal fusion surgery, lupus, breast cancer, muscular dystrophy, diabetes, and cataracts. Spending

most of her days ministering to others, she now took her turn to receive some support at a crucial time of need. She admitted she was weary from her days spent cooking, laundering, visiting, and caring for her extended family.

In the midst of our phone call, she mentioned that one of the hardest parts of living alone was that no one was there to sing with. After chat-

ting about her favorite hymn, “Be Still, My Soul,” I suggested we sing it together before we prayed. The excitement was palpable through the phone lines as I heard the sound of her feet briskly walking to another room to grab her hymnal.

We sang all the verses with passion, she leading the way, and I following along. Thankfully, I didn’t stumble too much on the words, knowing that she had

them in front of her. We prayed and hung up the phone, both fully satisfied that our souls had been refreshed and our weary bodies renewed by the Spirit's obvious presence and power.

This Friday night conversation with Fran reminded me of the crying need today for shortening the distance between pulpit and pew. There are more Frans out there than we could ever imagine. All are desirous of meaningful communion with God, acknowledged and enhanced by pastors who understand the importance of leading others into a deeper fellowship with Christ and ultimately with one another as a faith community. This thought generated two prominent questions in my mind.

First, is it too much to ask or assume or even dream about a day when spiritual direction and formation are the central aspect of pastoral ministry and congregational life?

My first exposure to spiritual direction walked into my professional ministry office in a plain T-shirt, bib overalls, and open-toed leather sandals. I had called my friend's spiritual director and had the audacity to invite him to come to my office the next time he was in the area. I told him I would need to meet and interview him to see if this (spiritual direction) was going to be right for me.

Surprisingly, he showed up. Humbly, he sat with me and patiently answered all of my naïve questions. Fifteen years later, I must admit it: my favor-

ite Episcopal monk has taught me more about listening prayer and authentic communion with God than any other human being I've had the privilege of knowing. All other learning on the subject of spiritual direction has been discovered through the scores of books I've read, courses, seminars, retreats, and a handful of spiritual leaders who truly understand what spiritual guidance is all about.

Now, serving as a spiritual director for other leaders, I am reminded daily why this ministry is so vital in the contemporary church. Because of people like Fran, who need to be pointed back to the Savior when the going gets tough, the way ahead seems blurry, and the people around us are wearing us thin. If for no other reason than hope, we need to embrace the joys and challenges of spiritual direction, especially from the pulpit to the pew.

Every time I share my journey into spiritual direction with others who are hungering for a deeper communion with God, I get a common response: "How can I experience the same thing?" Many have had good discipleship experiences; some have even been well mentored, but few have had the privilege of ongoing spiritual guidance purely for the sake of developing the "muscles" of our soul's connection with the living God. We need to raise up a new generation of pastoral leaders who understand this need and step to the plate to fulfill it, sooner rather than later.

As a result of my growing passion for developing leaders who "get it" (spiritual direction and formation) and live it, God has placed a big vision in this heart of mine that I dream about seeing fulfilled in my lifetime, even if it happens in

only a handful of well-meaning congregations. Imagine with me the vision of a Spirit-empowered Church (ecclesia) led by spiritual leaders who invite others to learn maturity together in a spiritual community (ecclesiola) where spiritual friendships practice spiritual conversations that uphold and affirm spiritual transformation for all, ultimately leading to spiritual

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renewal—making "little Christs" to light up the world with his love—in our lives, communities, and throughout the world.

A Spirit-empowered Church led by spiritual leaders ... learning in spiritual community ... loving as spiritual friends ... listening for spiritual transformation ... living out spiritual renewal ... leaning on the Spirit's strength.

It's a mouthful: comprehensive, holistic, and possible. These are the subjects that swirl about the spiritual formation movement of which every reader of Conversations is now a part, whether as evangelical, Catholic,

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or Orthodox. We are using these terms and defining them in similar ways, some in more classical language and others in more contemporary lingo. But we're all on the same page as it relates to our hearts' longing to see this movement shape the future of Christianity worldwide.

Obviously, there is a growing hunger all around us for a more authentic walk with the Trinity. (Some have even proposed that it's a dance!) If George Barna is even half-right about the "revolution" going on today (see George Barna, *Revolution*, Tyndale House, 2005), thousands of believers are dissatisfied with their local church experience.

If Willard, Foster, Peterson, Crabb, Benner, Bakke, and others are on the cusp of the spiritual formation movement of the 21st century as our thought leaders, then there are millions of spiritually hungry believers ready to follow their lead.

And if evangelical seminaries like Fuller, Talbot, Denver, Trinity, Gordon-Conwell, and others are wise enough to pay attention to the abundance of ancient and modern literature, examples of transformed churches, and growth of leadership in the spiri-

tual formation movement burgeoning today, then members of our congregations may, in fact, become better nurtured by a new breed of ministers who are ready to carry the torch.

Second, what will it take for a grand vision to be planted, take root, go deep, and ultimately blossom before our very eyes?

Since our movement toward spiritual formation is organic, and the ministry of spiritual direction is life-giving, the church dare not program itself out of touch with the authentic ways in which pastoral ministry and congregational life are to be achieved. Instead of becoming program developers, pastors and leaders need to become spiritual guides to all who hunger for more of God's unfailing love.

The soil needs to be prepared by the Spirit of God for his Church.

When members of the early Church were leaning fully on the Spirit of God for their life together, they experienced Pentecost. After a forty-day "retreat," with Jesus speaking to them about the kingdom of God, the Spirit prepared them, empowered them, visited them, and united them around God's purposes and priorities. As a result, all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit; they were amazed and perplexed by his presence, and they worshiped from the depths of their souls.

Imagine the 21st-century Church experiencing a similar

Pentecost, when the eyes of our hearts will be opened to the reality of God's powerful presence in our midst. How does this occur? When we incline our ears in his direction and trust that he will work powerfully in our midst, only then does he speak with clarity, comfort, and conviction.

When Fran gave voice to her heart's deepest concerns, she cried out to Almighty God. Her greatest comfort was in the knowledge that the Spirit would indeed hear her prayer and provide that coming-alongside strength that only the Spirit can give. Being carried along by the Spirit gave her renewed joy in her service and hope for her tomorrows.

We are engaged in spiritual activity that requires a fresh wind of God's Spirit to blow through our churches and ignite hearts with his love, grace, mercy, and peace. "You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence" (Acts 2:28). May it be so in our generation as well.

Then seeds need to be planted under the guidance of spiritual leadership.

If a new outpouring of spiritual wisdom is to come upon God's church, then pastors and leaders in positions of spiritual authority must be prepared. If spiritual formation and direction are to be experienced in local churches, then servant leaders must be raised up who have demonstrated their ability to serve as spiritual guides. This requires first and foremost that our leaders be good listeners: to the Spirit of God and to one another.

Such men as Peter, John,

Stephen, and the other apostles led the “seminary” of the first-century Church. They were thrust into action by the pressing need of the day. They stepped to the plate and offered outstanding leadership, both from the pulpit and on the streets. They preached, warned, pleaded, and prayed. They served, baptized, taught, and healed. As a result, they maintained their focus on listening for and obeying the call of God.

Today’s seminaries are doing a tremendous job training the next generation of leaders. However, the focus must remain on giving “attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). The temptation is to move away from these two central priorities and embrace lesser or many or much that in turn squeezes out the one focus of our hearts. The apostles were challenged by the outer circle of busyness, but, thankfully, they acknowledged, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables” (Acts 6:2).

The seminary students I have the privilege of serving are beginning to see that their training years are more than purely academic. We are inviting students to cultivate the habits of their hearts in their personal prayer closets, come together as peers in life-giving spiritual friendships, and set apart significant blocks of time for soul Sabbath prayer. We are seeing meaningful transformation as a result and are hope-filled for the future.

When “waiting on tables” or any number of other time-consuming opportunities are presented to our leaders, the discipline required is to choose instead to be present with others in prayer and the Word,

two essential ingredients of Trinitarian spiritual guidance. This is a huge challenge for the busy pastor or leader, but one that must be conquered if the spiritual formation movement is to be sustained.

In order for roots to develop, there is need for water and nutrients offered in the context of spiritual community.

When the believers of the early Church were living in the fullness of spiritual community, they were “filled with awe...were together and had everything in common...gave to anyone as he had need...broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people” (Acts 2:42–47).

Few believing communities experience anything close to this today. We are splintered and scattered and self-absorbed. We are living in a rat race, competing against one another more than supporting and sustaining one another’s lives. The need for authentic spiritual community today is larger than life, and few are willing to let go of worldly pursuits in place of genuine community.

It’s difficult to cultivate meaningful community in which the “one anothers” of the Scriptures—i.e., love, serve, encourage, care for, pray for, and submit to one another—truly come alive. Some are devoting “40 Days” to deepening their communities, providing a springboard that leads to a lifestyle of community-based ministry. Our local church has done that, and there is deeper commitment to one another at a

personal level as a result.

Among those engaged in spiritual formation and direction, there is a clarion call resounding for pastors and leaders to water the movement with a healthy dose of common unity. Only then will we know what it is to come alongside one another and fulfill the commandments of the Lord with passionate zeal.

The blossoms will come, eventually, with lots of patience, love, and care, enveloped by the strength of spiritual friendship.

Filled with the Spirit and awakened to the joy of communion, the early believing community of faith found themselves in a unique place, “one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had... much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money

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from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need" (Acts 4:32-35).

The Scriptures tell us here that Barnabas sold one of his fields and brought the money to the apostles. Immediately thereafter, we learn about how Ananias and Sapphira did the opposite: they sold a piece of property but kept back part of the money for themselves. At this point in the early Church, we begin to see how deceit and division destroy relationships and mission.

Readers of this journal have undoubtedly experienced the joy of spiritual friendship. We can list by name people who have been a part of our lives at this level of relationship. When I develop such a friendship, I long for it to grow deeper. There are certainly obstacles that will restrict this, but the investment of time leads to a richer life in Christ.

All of us need the gift of spiritual friendship generously given and reciprocated. Since so many pastors and leaders find themselves in lonely places today, the grace offered in friendship must all the more be granted to them. Out of this safe place of belonging, we blossom forth as the people we're intended to become. This is a gift that comes right back to the giver, and one that will undoubtedly provide life for the spiritual formation movement and strength to all who provide guidance for others.

Growth will begin to occur naturally and organically through life-changing spiritual transformation.

It's utterly remarkable to note the many ways lives were changed through a personal encounter with the living God in the early Church. Over and over again, stories were recorded for us in the book of Acts that recounted these miracles. When confronted by the rulers and elders of the people, Peter and John spoke eloquently of how Jesus marked their lives forever. Why were they so bold? "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

Organically and miraculously, the Church was being built right before their eyes. It was a marvel to observe and a joy to serve. Even though these were ordinary men, it was astonishing to note how obviously they had been with Jesus. In the same way, when pastors and other spiritual leaders work with others in direction, on retreat, or in small groups filled with hungry hearts, their love for God and one another becomes almost palpable.

For this new way of living to be embraced will require radical change. We will no longer be program-based, but instead relationally focused. We will choose authenticity in our preaching and teaching ministries, inviting others to join in the journey of brokenness and renewal. We will slow down the draining pace of life in order to reorient ourselves around priorities that are more life-sustaining. We will look for God at work in the everyday events of our lives. And we will truly and genuinely be living out of the core of our being, and inviting others to join us in this wide-open space where our salvation comes alive.

When pastors and leaders recognize that the number-one priority of their ministry is reconciliation—encouraging a vibrant

relationship of trusting God and one another as the people of God—the cost to be paid is far outstripped by the transformation that occurs in the context of forgiveness, grace, and love. We must urge our leaders to pursue that end with all their hearts, souls, minds, and strength.

Fruitful multiplication will happen only as the seasons of change are survived and the intentionality of leaders takes root in the hearts and lives of a new generation of servant leaders who share the dream and build the team for tomorrow...in turn, giving birth to spiritual renewal worldwide.

When we lean in God's direction, lead with the heart, learn how to mature together as believers, listen intently to one another's hearts, and love in a manner befitting our name as Christians, then the life that will emerge in our movement toward spiritual formation will bear fruit that will last for all eternity. This is the essence of spiritual renewal, something all of us long for, pray for, and desire more than anything else.

The first-century Church led the way when "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). This didn't happen by osmosis; it grew out of a renewed generation of Christ-followers who were passionate about knowing

God at the deepest place, who came together for worship and service, and enjoyed together the favor of God. They not only survived amidst challenging opposition and persecution; they thrived in their suffering.

The spiritual formation movement today is contributing significantly to the spiritual renewal of the Church. When believers come alive in the Spirit and begin to orient their daily lives around the practices of listening prayer, contemplative Bible reading, and reflective disciplines, their souls are refreshed, and their lives are renewed. As a result, the world around them is marked with the presence of Christ. Out of the depth of our souls we experience vitality in service... renewal from the inside out.

We who have embraced the

journey of spiritual formation understand the value associated with our pain and heartache. We have been invited into a deeper walk of faith, have experienced the graceful touch of the heavenly Father, and in our enriched expression of faith have found our home among one another.

We are like Fran, my 87-year-old friend, who, knowing her need for guidance, was willing to reach out to a pastor who cared for her soul. The guidance was light, but the joy of our fellowship was deep. May this experience become normative for the 21st-century Church, and may the pastors and leaders of our generation step forward with holy boldness and humility of heart to lead us onward and upward to glory: for God's sake, for our sakes, and for the sake of the Name

that draws us together as one.

¹ All Scripture quotations used in this article are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.

About the Author

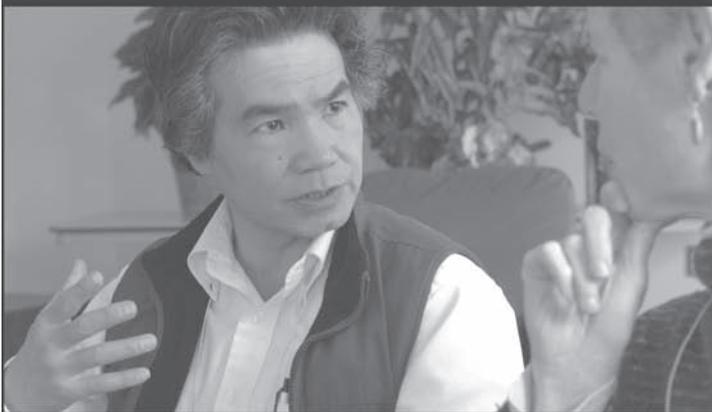


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