

Spiritual Direction with Evangelicals

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In the Christian tradition, spiritual direction has long been the domain of contemplative faith traditions such as Roman Catholicism, Episcopalianism, and the Orthodox tradition. There is a culture and a language that is understood in these traditions that helps support the one seeking direction. For those in whom the Spirit is moving, spiritual direction is a natural choice evolving out of a lifestyle of cultivating awareness of God's presence. But if one comes out of a less contemplative faith tradition, like Evangelicalism, spiritual direction may be a foreign concept. Evangelicals have a more cognitive approach to their relationship with God and are not familiar with spiritual disciplines such as silence, solitude and centering prayer which might move them into a more intimate being with God. There may be some ways to approach the practice of spiritual direction that would make it more accessible and appealing to Evangelicals.

I will look at why spiritual direction is needed in this particular faith tradition and what the challenges are in introducing and offering it. In addition, as a model, I will explore what is taking place at Living Word Community Church, a moderately sized Evangelical church in York, Pennsylvania and how they have, to use Richard Foster's terminology, merged the evangelical stream with the contemplative stream.

Evangelicals:

Who They Are, What They Believe

Generally, as a group, Evangelicals ascribe to the authority of Scripture and to the overarching theme of creation, fall, redemption and restoration. Christ is central to their faith. They believe in both His humanity and divinity. The core of their faith lies in the way He lived His life and the forgiveness of their sins through His death and resurrection. They believe in the importance of having a personal relationship with Christ. They also value service and sharing their faith with others.

Unfortunately, many people confuse Evangelicalism with fundamentalism, which has a more rigid theology and lifestyle. Like most other faith traditions, Evangelicals represent a wide range of views. There is the perception that

all Evangelicals are conservative, both theologically and politically. Although this is true for many, there are others who hold conservative theological views and are more liberal in their politics. This varied spectrum of thought has been further broadened by the 'emergent' church paradigm.

Evangelicals place a high value on the Word of God. They tend to approach Scripture from an intellectual or cognitive orientation. The main method used to engage Scripture is inductive Bible study, asking questions of the text such as; what is the context, to whom is it being written and why, when and where is this taking place and what is the application to my life. Although Scripture is held as divinely inspired, the Bible is generally approached like a textbook.

Putting their faith into action is also of high importance. *"For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead."* (James 2:26, NRSV). Although they acknowledge that faith is what keeps you in right relationship with God, there is a culture of 'doing for God' that many times can be the gauge that is used to measure spirituality. The concept of 'being' with God is not familiar.

Because of the importance of Jesus and His divinity, any approach to spiritual direction that does not honor this perspective will not be acceptable to Evangelicals. Evan Howard, in a [Christianity Today](#) article, *Three Temptations of Spiritual Formation*, says, "Spiritual formation speaks of a shaping process with reference to the spiritual dimension of a person's life. Christian spiritual formation thus refers to the process by which believers become more fully conformed and united to Christ." Therefore, any attempt to introduce spiritual formation that does not point the individual to Christ will be seen as suspect and may be viewed as attempting draw one away from Jesus.

Approaching Spiritual Direction with Evangelicals

It might be helpful to consider how language could create a barrier for Evangelicals seeking out spiritual direction. The approach and the language used will be very important in making contemplative spirituality attractive to them. As stated earlier, Christ is central to their belief system. Any language that isn't 'Jesus', 'God' or 'Holy Spirit' centered will create an obstacle. Using terms like the Universe, the Divine, and the Presence may cause



the Evangelical to be suspicious that they are being pointed to something other than God, as these are not terms they use to describe God. Even words like 'meditation' can cause concern. Although the word *meditate* is used in Scripture, most Evangelicals use it in the context of quoting a verse. For example, Ps 1:2, NRSV:

*But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.*

When one says that they spend 20 minutes a day meditating, it sounds too much like an Eastern practice, complete with sitting cross legged and repeating "ohm". Meditating on a verse, to an Evangelical, usually means memorizing it. There is no context for simply sitting in God's presence with no expectation except to be with God. An explanation is helpful; the goal of Christian meditation is not the emptying of the mind but rather dwelling on Christ, being completely open to Him. It is important to also explain the concept of *intention* so that it is clear who we are meditating on and why. This is why

we, as directors, need to know the language of those who come to us for direction. What words may have different connotations? How might the words we choose to use hinder the very process we wish to assist? The same way one would not use Jesus as a reference point with a Jewish directee, they would want to be sensitive to an Evangelical's desire to have a Christ-centered context for spiritual formation.

There are other barriers to be aware of. Insight into the possible reluctance and/or resistance to spiritual formation can be gained from another quote from Howards:

...because of our roles as 'protectors of the faith', evangelicals have been slow to welcome the trends regarding Christian spiritual formation. The intentional use of imagination in prayer, the idea of 'listening' or 'centering' prayer and the notion of spiritual 'direction' have resembled to some too much of what we have meant to keep out of Christianity:

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New Age ideas and works righteousness. Hence we have traditionally kept spiritual formation at arm's length.

Many Evangelicals have had no practice of sitting in silence, little familiarity with any prayer other than intercession, no knowledge of lectio divina. Most, until recently, have never even heard of the term 'spiritual direction'.

Finally, Evangelicals are familiar with a discipleship model as an approach to growth. It is important to teach the tenets of the faith, to help people understand concepts like grace, salvation, and forgiveness. Biblical teaching is stressed hoping to build a foundation for the individual's faith. Because of the prevalence of the discipleship model, education and clarification are helpful to distinguish between discipleship and spiritual direction

Given these challenges, one can see the difficulties of introducing the concept of spiritual direction to Evangelicals. However there can be no doubt that it is needed. Many Evangelicals are seeking a deeper intimacy with God, although they may not know how to articulate that desire. They also are finding the intellectual approach to their faith lacking. With well-known Evangelicals such as Larry Crabb, Dallas Willard and Gary Moon writing about spiritual direction, it has highlighted the need for *more*. In Sacred Rhythms, Ruth Haley Barton, a Shalem Institute graduate and an Evangelical, speaks to this longing. The first chapter, *Longing for More*, discusses the desire that is inside us that longs for deeper intimacy with God this way: "Your desire for more of God than you have right now, your longing for love, your need for deeper levels of spiritual transformation than you have experienced so far is the truest thing about you." (pg 24)

In an interview for Christianity Today, Jeannette Bakke, author of *Holy Invitations* said:

Evangelicals are listening for God in ways that are different than our usual

understanding of discipleship. We are looking at many Christian disciplines, including prayer, silence and solitude, discernment, journaling and others...Spiritual direction is only one of these disciplines many evangelical Christians are learning more about and exploring.

For individuals who have no experience in the contemplative tradition, an introduction to the spiritual disciplines is a good place to begin this journey. Providing classes, where they can begin to learn and practice the disciplines will give them an environment to begin to pay attention to the work and movement of God in their lives. One possibility might be to offer classes in the discipline of lectio divina. Given Evangelicals' love and reverence for Scripture, introducing them to a way to engage Scripture that may open their hearts to such spiritually formative practices. Additionally, offering classes in different types of listening prayer could be very valuable. Within this discipline, they will also be exposed to the concept of 'being'. As stated before, Evangelicals are 'doers'. Their faith has legs. The thought of simply sitting with God, being in His presence without asking for anything, solely for the purpose of loving Him and allowing Him to love them, is foreign. The example of Martha and Mary will resonate with them. They may identify with Martha, and her service attitude, but they know that Jesus said Mary had chosen the better thing. That being said, they have no idea of how to just 'be'.

A Model: Living Word Community Church

I offer Living Word Community Church as a model. Living Word is a non-denominational Evangelical church. It is just over 30 years old with a weekly attendance of approximately 2,500 adults. Eight years

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ago, one of our associate pastors, who had left Living Word to pastor his own church, returned. While away, he had gone through a crisis of faith, during which time, he was introduced to spiritual formation. He practiced the disciplines, acquired a spiritual director and, in time, went to school to become a spiritual director. When he returned to Living Word he brought a new paradigm to the fellowship. Seven years ago, he offered a class called *Soul Shaping* where he began to introduce some of the concepts of contemplative spirituality. I was in that first class. At the same time, he offered a nine month training, limited to ten people, who desired to become spiritual directors. I was also in that training program.

I resonate with the experiences described by Jeannette Bakke. As an Evangelical and a Christ follower for over 30 years, my faith was strong but very intellectual. It felt like there should be more, that there was something missing. When I was introduced to contemplative spirituality and began practicing the disciplines, my relationship with God took on a richness and depth that took me by surprise. Although I was falling in love with God and discovering how deeply He loved me, it was at times, a very scary journey for me. The foundation of my Christian walk was shifting. I was leaving behind formulas I had used during my quiet time and I was practicing things like centering prayer, which I had never even heard of before. I was wondering to myself if it was okay. I kept reminding myself of what my intention was – intimacy with Jesus - and I trusted where I felt God leading me. I also felt God calling me into a place of walking with other Evangelicals into deeper intimacy with God. That was one of the reasons I applied to Shalem Institute's Spiritual Guidance Program. Because I had not been part of a contemplative tradition, I wanted to move into what I felt God calling me to do with integrity and I felt that meant getting some additional training.

I share this part of my journey to create an understanding for what has taken place at Living

Word. The desire to see other Evangelicals *experience* God, to understand what it means to 'be', and to have a more holistic spirituality led us to look for ways to bring spiritual formation to our fellowship.

We now offer a four week class called *Savoring the Scriptures*, designed to teach people how to experience lectio divina. It has been positively received and there is a waiting list each time it is offered. In this class, I am able to introduce people to not only lectio but to the concept of creating a sacred space to meet with God, breath prayer, and a new way of thinking about and experiencing meditation. I highlight the way our faith tradition has had a textbook approach to Scripture: studying, memorizing and reciting back what we have learned. I offer that we might want to approach it like a love letter from God, to us, personally. That concept has resonated with those who have taken the class. Because of the desire we sense in our church for a more contemplative experience of God, additional spiritual formation classes are being planned.

For the last seven years, we have constructed a labyrinth for the season of Lent. This is a huge project taking months to plan and two weeks to construct. We create a space for people to have a multi-sensory experience with God. A chapel, within our main church building, is transformed into a sacred space to allow people the opportunity to experience God in a new way. For example, one year's design consisted of ten rooms. Each room depicted a different aspect of the last days of Jesus' life. Participants are given a booklet to assist them in their journey. Great attention is given to choosing the art, creating the entire environment and writing the booklet to better usher people into engaging God not just with their intellect but with their emotions and spirit. The labyrinth has become a much anticipated event each year, not only by the people who attend Living Word, but also for people from other churches in the area. Over 1,000 people go through the labyrinth during the Lenten season.

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We are in our fourth year of offering a nine month program called *Restoring Eve*. It is a course for women that is a combination of Biblical teaching on themes of creation, fall and redemption, as well as, issues that women struggle with...body image, sexuality, finding their voice. This is all done in a spiritually formative context. The women are encouraged to be still with God on a daily basis, listening to what He might be saying to them. They are given questions, quotes, (etc.) to sit with throughout the week. They are asked to journal about what is happening, what they are noticing. They then share what they are hearing from God in a small group. The group participants are taught how to listen, ask questions, and how not to give opinions, quote Scripture, teach or give advice. There are two mandatory weekend retreats built into the program so that the women can spend some extended, intentional time alone with God.

I am often asked to speak to different ministries in the church about spiritual formation, including women's ministries, young adults, junior high and senior high youth groups and others. Topics range from silence and solitude, to contemplative prayer and lectio divina. Several times in the past, we have offered a spiritual formation module during our Leadership Summit, which was open to other churches. The topics have been small group spiritual formation and lectio divina.

One of the main components of Living Word is a small group ministry. With the size of our church, it is one way for people to grow in their faith and build relationships. The focus of these groups is, mainly, learning more about God and growing in fellowship. Over the course of two years, we took six people through a nine month training process to prepare them to lead *Encounter* groups – groups that will have spiritual formation as their focus, allowing people to experience small periods of silence together, while learning the disciplines, sharing what they have noticed about God's movement in their lives over the week and learning how to ask questions rather than have answers.

There are other areas where the fruit of spiritual formation is being experienced. We have a writing group,

where participant's writings (including poetry) revolve around their experience of God and a Creative Arts Ministry where spiritual formation and the arts come together. Our children's ministry has created space in each child's Sunday school room for quiet – a small 'sacred altar area' where children can go to be 'still' with God.

We have a spiritual formation library so that people can have access to resources. Two books that are very accessible for Evangelicals are [Invitation to Solitude and Silence](#) and [Sacred Rhythms](#) by Ruth Haley Barton. Her Evangelical background and her association with Willow Creek gives her credibility with other Evangelicals. She understands the dynamics of Evangelicalism and uses language that makes the contemplative life appealing. Also available are books by Richard Foster, Richard Rohr, Brennan Manning, Henri Nouwen and a variety of other authors. Subjects range from spiritual disciplines to engaging God with the arts.

And finally, we continue to offer our own Spiritual Direction Program that is geared towards spiritual direction with Evangelicals. It has a two year format. Year One is Spiritual Deepening which allows the class participants to learn more about contemplative spirituality. It is a combination of teaching and experiential times, as well as discussion about what they are discovering. Year Two focuses on the art and calling of being a spiritual director. Participants meet once a week, for two hours, and do one weekend retreat during the course of the program. We take approximately 10 people through this program a year. Not all will go on to do direction but may use what they have learned in other areas in the church. We do not 'advertise' that we offer spiritual direction, although it is listed on our website. People find out about it, mainly, by word of mouth. At this time we have approximately 70 people at Living Word receiving spiritual direction.

Our goal is not to have a small pocket of people giving or receiving direction but to work towards creating a culture in which people are experiencing God in deeper ways. We see interest in spiritual formation increasing and see more

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contemplative ways of 'being' gently moving into other ministries in the church.

For us, spiritual direction is one of a variety of offerings to our fellowship. It seems that as we offer opportunities for spiritual formation, people naturally want to move into a spiritual direction relationship. I do not propose to say that what we are doing at Living Word would be transferable to other Evangelical churches. In fact, I believe there are Evangelical churches who would think that we have, at best, shifted our focus from what it should be on and at worse, are leading people down a dangerous path of heresy. Interestingly enough, as Evangelicals, we are taught to look at the fruit that is produced in one's life. What we at Living Word have witnessed is similar to what some of the writers I mentioned previously have discovered. Information or knowledge of spiritual things does not change people. It does not lead to transformation. Transformation comes about as your spirituality moves from your head to your heart and you allow God to do what He wants to do inside of you.

Transformation is a gift of grace, not something we think ourselves into. If the fruit is how we measure the grace of God at work in our lives then I am surrounded by people being transformed into the likeness of Jesus as they find themselves loving where loving is difficult and forgiving where forgiveness seems impossible. They are tasting intimacy with the God they have known for years but are just now beginning to *know* and experience. They are discovering what it means to be known by God. I sense that the Spirit is moving at Living Word...that God desires Evangelicals to also have greater intimacy with Him and that He is stirring the hearts and spirits of individuals and drawing them into deeper relationship with Him. He is using the contemplative practices to create an environment where this can happen. I, as an individual, and we, as a church, are full of gratitude to God for what He is doing in our midst...and what He has yet to do. We want to continue to be open to whatever He has for us.

There is also a sense that the Holy Spirit is moving in the Evangelical church as a whole, evidenced by openness to the spiritual disciplines and a shift from an informational mindset to a desire to experience true transformation. Since most Evangelicals have not been exposed to the spiritual disciplines, offerings that open the door to spiritual formation may be the best place to begin rather than with the actual practice of spiritual direction. This allows for opportunities to shift the spiritual paradigm from primarily *thinking* to *experiential*, from *informational* to *transformational*. They would be given a chance to build upon the solid foundation they have in Scripture, adding to it as they begin to have a felt experience of God, as faith moves from their head to their heart.

The significance of this shift in awareness cannot be minimized. In the book, [Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls](#), one of the authors, Gary Moon, describes the shift this way;

The profundity of the simple notion of learning how to experience the presence of God was recently highlighted for (me) while participating in a roundtable discussion of Christian spiritual formation. Each person present had two things in common: a long history of involvement in the evangelical world and a recent, personal captivation by the process of spiritual formation.

The juxtaposition of these two common factors should not be missed. These were long-term, card-carrying members of evangelicalism who had spent their lifetimes in Christian study and service. But only recently, it seemed, had enrolled in Christianity 101: ongoing enjoyment of the love and presence of God(pg 13).

Spiritual Direction is not only possible with Evangelicals, it is imperative. But, as spiritual directors, it is important that we know who is walking through our door...how they have come to know God and how He might be moving in them. We need to understand the language that they use and be able to communicate in a way that creates opportunities for them to move into deeper relationship with God.

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