

## The Ministry of Spiritual Direction and Spiritual Revitalization of Congregations

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It is to bind you together in love and to stir your minds, so that your understanding may come to full development, until you really know God's secret—the mystery of Christ in you and among you—in which all the jewels of wisdom and knowledge are hidden (Colossians 1: 27; 2:2).<sup>1</sup>

As a people we seemed to be starved for a sense of mystery, for some kind of transcendent power and meaning that somehow intersects with and enlivens our rather mundane lives. We gobble up books and videos that promise to reveal *the secret* for obtaining the truth, love, and life for which we so yearn.<sup>2</sup> Another Indiana Jones epic film lures us into a dangerous, yet thrilling search for the hidden treasure of “The Crystal Skull of Akator.”<sup>3</sup> The hauntingly beautiful Crystal Skull, according to ancient legend, contains mystical powers of knowledge, wisdom, and healing. Once found, one must discover the key to unlock its secrets. So too, it appears that the purpose of the letter written to the Church at Colossae was to counteract false teachings perhaps influenced by Platonic philosophy and ascetic practices for reaching communion with the Divine. Paul prays for them “asking God to fill [them] with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding” (Colossians 1:9).<sup>4</sup> He then reminds them that “the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, your hope of glory” (Colossian 1:26-28). The secret in which all the jewels of wisdom and knowledge of God are hidden has been revealed: it is *Christ in us!* Said another way by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*:

I want you woven into a tapestry of love, in touch with everything there is to know of God. Then you will have minds confident and at rest, focused on Christ, God's great mystery. All the richest treasures of wisdom and knowledge are embedded in that mystery and nowhere else. And we've been shown the mystery! I'm telling you this because I don't want anyone leading you off on some wild-goose chase, after other so-called mysteries, or “the Secret” (Colossians 2-4).<sup>5</sup>

The fact is, however, many persons who have heard of Christ, including clergy, are searching for spiritual wisdom and understanding; some leaving the Church to look elsewhere; some exploring other congregations or denominations; and some staying put—yearning to experience the reality of Christ's love for them, in them, and flowing through them in the particular ministries to which they are called. Likewise, the soul of congregations, wearied by internal conflicts, confusing messages, and wrenching separations, long for a renewed clarity of vision, sense of purpose, and vitality of spirit within their communal life and mission in the world. For many persons today, it is not enough to know about God or about Christ. Rather, many desire “to taste and see the goodness of the Lord” (Psalms 34:8; 1 Peter 2:3), and to experience “the breadth and the length, the height and the depth, until, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, (they)

are filled with the utter fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:16-19). While this inner illumination of mind and quickening of heart is surely the work of the Holy Spirit as Paul and Calvin remind us,<sup>6</sup> the ministry of spiritual direction assists persons in becoming more aware of, attentive to, and responsive to the presence and action of Christ’s Spirit in the midst of the everyday realities of their lives and communities of faith. Indeed, theologians, ministers, and laity within the Reformed tradition are reclaiming the guidance of the Holy Spirit found within their rich heritage and in various practices by which they engaged in spiritual guidance.<sup>7</sup> Just as Christian asks Hopeful in Bunyan’s classic *The Pilgrim’s Progress* “How stands it between God and your soul now”<sup>8</sup> so a spiritual director similarly wonders with individuals, small groups, a congregation: “What is God up to with you, in your committee, in this congregation?” Trouble is, people have a very difficult time knowing how to listen to what the Spirit is saying amidst the frantic pace of family, work, and community responsibilities as well as the constant demands filtering in from being technologically “wired.” Furthermore, I have noticed that many people have not a clue as to how to even articulate to themselves, much less reflect on their experience of God’s grace or “how stands it between God and their soul.” (They are able, however, to articulate somewhat better about some of the doctrines and creeds of their faith, but not how such intersect and inform their living.) How then do they learn to develop an interior life, develop a capacity to listen to the voice of Christ’s Spirit, and to discern how it differs from other voices claiming their loyalty and obedience, if someone does not assist them in connecting gospel grace to their own questions, hungers, joys, fears arising out of their lived experience? Those called by God, guided by the Spirit, and validated by others for the ministry of spiritual guidance can assist others in bridging the Word and their inner and outer worlds.

Spiritual directors as well as spiritual leaders listen for and seek with others the direction of Christ’s Spirit for their lives, their ministries, and the congregation’s mission. They help build bridges among a persons’ experience of Christ in faith, discerning vocation and gifts, and engaging the Church and world in service. Consequently, spiritual directors bring spiritual revitalization to congregations by assisting individuals, small groups, committees, and entire congregations to listen for, reflect upon, and wisely discern what God is already doing in their midst, noticing what diminishes their responsiveness to God, and what gives them greater energy in doing the work God calls them to do together.<sup>9</sup> They become congregational spiritual companions able to assist others in a variety of formats, or as Celia Allison Hahn puts it, in “layers of discernment.”<sup>10</sup> Congregational spiritual companions work with:

(1) Spiritual formation groups and individuals in helping persons and groups deepen their relationship and discipleship with Christ through engaging in various ways of praying with the Bible, spiritual disciplines, and learning how to pay attention to “the mighty gifts with which we are endowed,” to notice that “indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God” and to reflect on “these benefits shed like dew from heaven upon us, (so that) we are lead as by rivulets to the spring itself,”<sup>11</sup> that is, to God who “is the fountain of every good.”<sup>12</sup> Then too, how much more are we to be aware of and grateful for the benefits given to us through the gift of faith that engrafts us in Christ.<sup>13</sup> Such awareness provides a foundation for “equipping the saints to discern their particular gifts for ministry.”<sup>14</sup>

(2) Church committees in learning how to listen to what God is doing in their midst and what kind of response to make through the creation of structures and programs that arise out of this discernment.

(3) The Session or Pastor-Parish Committee in assuming their roles as deacons and elders, spiritual leaders, and models within the congregation. Spiritual directors can coach pastors (if so invited) in ways of conducting session meetings that incorporate elements of discernment, such as biblical and theological reflection, silent and vocal prayer; ways of helping members to focus upon their Christian identity and purpose as Session members responsible for making decisions that affect the well-being of the whole congregation.<sup>15</sup>

(4) The pastor as spiritual leader facilitating the whole congregation in discernment of its mission, vision, and core values or regarding an important matter facing the congregation. Spiritual leaders, according to Henry and Richard Blackaby, “seek to lead God’s way” and “to move people from where they are to where God wants them to be.”<sup>16</sup> Those engaged in spiritual leadership as well as spiritual direction are obligated by their calling: (a) to be aware of abiding in and with God, (b) to seek guidance in the Word and from other believers, (c) to pay attention to how God is moving in the life of persons and the congregation, and, (d) to let go of one’s ego and agenda in order to be courageously obedient to God in order that both they and others they accompany including the congregation can accomplish together the work to which God calls them, thereby participating in Christ’s redemptive work in the world. And, because a spiritual leader cannot guide members of a congregation deeper than where they themselves have gone in the Christian life, it is their responsibility to seek out ways in which to nourish their own spiritual growth and be willingly held accountable for their own spiritual practices and leadership, most likely by someone whom they trust to be a Spirit-led person and a capable spiritual guide or mentor in addition to accountability structures laid down in the denomination’s polity.

As persons, groups, and congregations commit themselves to listen to, discern, and respond to the Word as it addresses them in the concrete realities of their lives and faith communities, they begin to notice a growing inner vitality of spirit within them activated by the Holy Spirit. According to Marjorie Thompson, growth in the spiritual life “is simply the increasing vitality and sway of God’s Spirit in us. It is a magnificent choreography of the Holy Spirit in the human spirit, moving us toward communion with both Creator and creation.” Indeed, the dynamism of Christ’s Spirit at work in us and through us energizes and revitalizes our lives and congregations drawing us “Into another intensity/ For a further union, a deeper communion... Requiring a condition of complete simplicity/ Costing not less than everything.”<sup>17</sup> At some point in our Christian journey, the sanctifying power of Christ’s Spirit at work in us may empower us to sincerely say with Paul, “All I want is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share in his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death” (Philippines 3:10). This power, given to us, the gift of the Holy Spirit illuminating our minds and enflaming our hearts—the gift of faith—is the key that unlocks the treasure we have in Christ. “Glory be to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory be to God from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus, forever. Amen” (Ephesians 3:20-21).

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<sup>1</sup> *The Jerusalem Bible*. Darton, Longman & Todd Limited and Doubleday and Co, Inc., 1966.

<sup>2</sup> Byrne, Rhonda. *The Secret*. Atria Books/Beyond Words, 2006.

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- <sup>3</sup> *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull, the Movie*. LucasFilms, Ltd., 2008.
- <sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible, The New International Version*. Zondervon, 1973.
- <sup>5</sup> Peterson, Eugene. *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English*. Nav Press, 1993.
- <sup>6</sup> I Cor. 2: 11; Eph. 3:19-19.  
McNeill, John T., ed. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Westminster, 1960, 1230 (3.2.7)  
“Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”
- <sup>7</sup> Schwanta, Tom. “Reclaiming the Guidance of the Holy Spirit,” *Reformed Spirituality Network*, No.2, 1998.  
Available online at <http://www.geocities.com/refspnet/>
- <sup>8</sup> Bunyan, John. *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1933, 149.
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. Jones, Serene. “Graced Practices: Excellence and Freedom in the Christian Life” in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass, Eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002, 51-77.
- <sup>10</sup> Hahn, Celia Allison and Colleagues, “Congregational Spiritual Companions: Walking with Churches on Their Faith Journeys.” *Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction*. Vol.12, No. 4, December 2006,47-51.
- <sup>11</sup> McNeill, Op.Cit., 1.1.1.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.2.1.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.1.1.
- <sup>14</sup> Cf. Ackerman, John. *Listening to God: Spiritual Formation in Congregations*. Alban Institute, 2001.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf. Standish, N. Graham. *Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Spiritual Purpose, Presence, and Power*. Alban Institute, 2004. Many Doctor of Ministry students have found Graham Standish’s discernment model for leading Session meetings to be very adaptable to various denominational polities. Similarly they attest to the spiritual vitality that arises out of making important decisions grounded in spiritual discernment.
- <sup>16</sup> Blackaby, Henry T. and Richard. *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People to God’s Agenda*. B&H Publishing Group, 2001, 20.
- <sup>17</sup> Eliot, T.S. “East Coker” *Four Quartets*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1943/1971.