



# Adult Spiritual Formation: Nurturing Adults in Christ and for Others

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I recently sat in a church pew with my wife and youngest daughter (age 14) and listened to a sermon about heaven. The preacher was reflecting upon the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. He said that we believe our souls will go to heaven when we die and our bodies will decompose in our graves until the end of time when God will raise our bodies and reunite them with our souls in heaven. He defended this position with citations from Scripture and with references to traditional Christian doctrines. He was driving to one key point: there is a physical dimension to heaven. In fact, he closed his sermon with that statement: “And in conclusion, heaven has a physical dimension.”

I sat there wondering the same things that I often wonder after sermons and religious education sessions: What does this have to do with my life today? How will this knowledge help me love my wife better, raise my daughter with greater wisdom, perform my job with greater integrity, treat my neighbor with kindness, etc.? What is the point of the doctrine of bodily resurrection, or of any doctrine for that matter, in everyday life? How do I apply my beliefs in the daily circumstances of my life? These are the questions of spirituality.

Let’s be clear. The doctrine of the resurrection of the body is critically important for Christians to believe in and to understand. But belief and understanding imply far more than rote knowledge. Rote knowledge is one piece of a broader picture of Christian faith formation, a picture that includes and is set in the context of spirituality. Expressing faith with words and concepts is only part of the spirituality equation. Lived experience is the other part. Maria Harris based her critique of James Fowler’s celebrated *Stages of Faith* on the fact that all of Fowler’s data was gathered through interviews. A fuller picture of faith maturity would require observation in real-life settings (see Regan, 57). Spiritual maturity is much more than what we

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say; it is also what we do that defines who we are in relation to God and others.

Spirituality experts often distinguish between information and formation. Churches need to pass on doctrinal information, but it rings hollow if the information piece is not offered in the context of the formation piece. Formation refers to the complete spectrum of the spiritual maturation process. Information is at the service of our broader formational process. Knowledge (information) helps us make sense of experience and give us cognitive structural parameters out of which we can conceptualize and speak about meaningful living (formation). Spirituality is concerned both with information and formation, words and actions if you will, but information is one small piece of the broader picture of spiritual formation. The preacher in the opening story offered information without speaking a word about spiritual formation. This is a common oversight in Christian faith formation.

In this essay, we will explore the meaning of spirituality, especially for adults; and then we will discuss strategies for churches to integrate their faith formation programs within the broader context of spiritual formation.

## Defining Christian Spirituality

Definitions for Christian spirituality have been abundant over the past fifty years. Here are several suggested definitions by notable spiritual writers from various traditions.

Robert Mulholland defines spiritual formation as, "...a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others." (Mulholland, 15) Selfless, other-oriented perspectives and behaviors are hallmarks of Christian spirituality. We learn to live this way by studying the words and actions of Jesus and incorporating them into our daily lives.

Christian spirituality is outward thinking. Jonathan Morrow, an evangelical pastor, critiques the evangelical tradition for being too inward focused. He writes:

Christianity is not just privately true, requiring our attention for only two hours on a Sunday morning; it is public and should affect the totality of life (i.e., a Christian worldview). Unfortunately, evangelicals have withdrawn from ethical, social, political, educational, and cultural issues and institutions. As evangelicals, we need to enter into dialogue in the public square and become part of the solution (not just heralds of the many problems).... The words of Francis Schaeffer ring as true today as the day they were penned: "True spirituality—the Christian life—flows on into the total culture. (Pettit, 49)

Christian spirituality calls us to take the faith we celebrate on Sunday and live from it in our public lives. Christianity is more nomadic than sedentary. A church turned in on itself risks compromising its Christian identity.

Richard Foster defines spirituality as the "with-God life." Foster devotes the third chapter of his book, *Life with God*, to outlining the biblical foundation for the belief that God is always with us. Spiritually mature adults respond to God's constant presence by consenting to being with God in each moment of daily life. Foster concludes the chapter, "God is with you; will you choose to be with God?" The mature adult Christian sees God in all things and in all events and participates with God's presence in all things and events.

Michael Downey is the editor of the award-winning *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*. He has defined Christian spirituality as

... the whole of the Christian's life as this is oriented to self-transcending knowledge, freedom, and love in light of

the ultimate values and highest ideals perceived and pursued in the mystery of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit in the church, the community of disciples. That is to say, spirituality is concerned with everything that constitutes Christian experience, specifically the perception and pursuit of the highest ideal or goal of Christian life, e.g., an ever more intense union with God disclosed in Christ through life in the Spirit.

Downey affirms what has been revealed in the earlier definitions: there is nothing that falls outside of the realm of a person's spiritual journey. Downey also emphasizes the critically important role of the Christian community in a person's spiritual formation. Christians cannot become spiritually mature apart from engagement in community.

A number of key points emerge from these definitions. We will explore four essential dimensions of Christian spirituality:

1. Christian spirituality is a movement from selfishness to love.
2. Christian spirituality connects us with God (The Trinity) in a communal setting.
3. Christian spirituality is nurtured through Scripture and church tradition.
4. Christian spirituality informs and forms every part of our lives.

## From Selfishness to Love

***Adults mature in their spirituality by moving from selfishness to love in every aspect of their lives.*** The independence that is sought after and celebrated in adolescence is found wanting as one grows into the awareness that healthy human functioning requires active participation in a complex network of give-and-take interdependent relationships. Adults embrace accountability over independence as a key component of

spiritual maturity. Several examples will illustrate this point:

- ***Married Adults:*** Married persons become more spiritually mature when they spurn independent behavior in their spousal relationships in favor of interdependent behavior. Selfish demands give way to negotiated agreements. No married person can mature spiritually while thinking and acting in ways that exclude the concerns of his or her spouse. As one body, a married couple is comprised of two persons who are as concerned about the other as they are for self. Selfishness has no place in marriage.
- ***Single Adults:*** Single persons become spiritually mature by engaging a broad range of relationships, from friends to co-workers to family members, with a spirit of generosity and concern for building up unity in the communities in which they live. Single persons are not called to single life because they desire to be unaccountable to others. Accountability calls one to responsible communal living and is only possible when a person transcends self-centered behavior in favor of mutuality. Selfishness, as with married persons, has no place in single living.
- ***Working Adults:*** Adults in the workplace become spiritually mature by choosing careers for which they are gifted and by sharing their gifts with a sense of justice and integrity. Spiritually mature workers pursue careers not from a self-centered motivation for wealth, but more so from a motivation to share one's gifts with the world. If wealth results from work, the spiritually mature individual uses wealth for the benefit of the community because of the Christian conviction that all gifts come from God

and are meant to be shared among all of God's creatures. Spiritually aware workers also have a strong sense that they represent the companies for which they work, and they are called to live in virtuous ways which bring honor to those companies. There is no room for selfishness in the workplace. Spiritually mature adults grow in love by sharing their God-given gifts with others and by graciously receiving and celebrating the gifts of others.

- *Homemaking:* Whether single or married, all adults are called to make a home for themselves, a place to express their deepest values and beliefs that are shared in a spirit of hospitality with all who are welcomed across the threshold. A home is more than a place to protect one from the elements. A home is more than a refuge from the world. The Christian home is a place for prayer, a place for extraordinary acts of love, and a place for unselfish sharing with a wide variety of people.

A defining mark of mature adult spirituality is a distinctly Christian sense of self. Spiritually mature adults find the center of themselves mysteriously outside of themselves, centered in the relationships they share with God and others. Adult spirituality is marked by a profound concern for the other that leads one to see the self in an entirely new way. I find myself, my truest self, by loving someone else. I put the concerns of others on the same level as my concerns for myself, and in so doing, I am stretched to new and enormously rewarding perspectives. In some remarkable circumstances, I will even put the needs of others above my own. Spouses and parents do this on a regular basis, and martyrs are shining examples of this type of mature self-giving. It is in the quest for the mystery of love in a relationship with another person or persons that an adult Christian finds joy and peace.

Christian adults, out of genuine concern for others, are also called to challenge unjust actions and structures in our communities. Once again, the measuring stick of love before selfishness is consistent and simple. Injustices are expressions of selfishness; someone or some organization is getting more than is due at the expense of another's needs. We can identify injustices by the way in which they obstruct harmony in human relationships. Contained within the movement from selfishness to love is the non-judgmental compulsion to invite others to the same kind of unselfish living.

## Connecting to God through Scripture and Tradition

The second and third parts of our definition of spirituality are concerned with the faith community and are especially relevant for faith formation directors. ***Adult spirituality is formed by and expressed in a faith community.*** The faith community has the privilege and the responsibility to pass on the gifts of Scripture and a faith tradition in an attractive, compelling, organized, and empowering way so that people can access the information they need to live their lives rooted in a Christian perspective.

***Spiritually mature adults take with them the grace experience in Christian community and use it to transform the world.*** One pastor sent a clear message to his parishioners when he changed all the exit signs in the church's worship space to enter signs, inviting parishioners to enter the world with renewed faith and energy to fulfill the mission of the church, which is to transform the world into a place ruled by love. The point of Sunday worship is to change the world between the Sundays of the year. A traditional Irish poem reveals the tragic nature of those who fail to capture the essence of the connection between religion and spirituality:



Paddy Murphy went to Mass;  
Never missed a Sunday.  
But Paddy Murphy went to hell  
For what he did on Monday.

Some of us miss the vital belief that faith and daily life are intimately intertwined. We mistakenly think that the work of God is completed inside church walls, and that the only people who do spiritual things of any significance are ministers, priests, and other religious professionals. Mother Theresa of Calcutta didn't agree. She was once asked, "How do you feel when people say of you that you are a living saint?" She wisely and simply replied: "Isn't everyone supposed to be a saint?"

Our participation in Sunday worship and other faith formation experiences at church help us to focus our relationship with God. The purpose of that focusing time is to put our worship and learning into action in whatever we find ourselves doing the other six days of the week. Sunday worship and Christian faith formation reach their fulfillment in faith-filled daily living, which gives shape to our beliefs and is the expression of mature spirituality.

## It's About Everything

There is nothing that we think, feel, say, or do that falls outside of the realm of spirituality. The simple reason for this is that God is everywhere. All of creation and every lived experience are doorways to the sacred. ***Spiritual maturity is the process of waking up to the divine presence in everyone and everything.***

Each person finds his or her unique spirituality by living with the eyes of faith wide open within the particular circumstances and routines of daily life. If you are at work, you are called to live workplace spirituality and allow your faith to guide your words and actions. If you are interacting with your spouse, you are called to live the spirituality of marriage and to express your

faith in God through the love you give to and receive from your spouse. If you are a farmer, you are called to live eco spirituality and to do your work with a reverent respect for the integrity of creation. If you are a student, academic spirituality calls you to intellectual curiosity and to be strong in the face of temptations such as plagiarism and cheating.

Spirituality is the way we allow our faith in God and our communal worship on Sunday to guide our every activity and interaction. Whatever you find yourself doing each day, you are being called within that activity to experience the power of God through the expression of your faith and worship. Your response to that call is what opens the door for God to transform the world into the likeness of the kingdom of God through your spiritual life.

## Characteristics of Adult Christian Spirituality

What does Christian spirituality look like? The Gospel of Matthew includes a fascinating teaching from the Lord about the end of the world that provides a key insight in the characteristics of spiritual maturity. Jesus compared the last day to the times of Moses before the flood. Note the ordinary nature of the activities he highlights: eating, drinking, marrying, and working.

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one

will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. (Matthew 24:36-42, NRSV)

One of the most thought-provoking pieces of this passage is that Jesus describes the activity of those “taken” and those “left” in exactly the same way. The two men in the field are doing the same thing; one is taken and one is left. The two women grinding meal are doing exactly the same thing; one is taken and one is left.

If Jesus’ primary concern for humanity was of a religious nature, then he would have described the saved or “taken” individuals in religious terms. The man or woman who was taken would have been praying or offering incense or performing a religious sacrifice while the ones who were left would have been swept up with the concerns of mundane daily living: working in the field and grinding meal. It is significant that the saved are doing their daily work.

The difference between the “taken” and the “left” is not a difference of religious participation; it is a difference of integration. We have to assume that one of the men in the field works his field with a heart filled with love for God and love for neighbor while the other does not. His religious experiences have been integrated into his daily work. The same is true for the women. We have to assume that one of the women grinding meal does so with a heart filled with love for God and love for neighbor while the other does not.

Jane Regan notes that outward behavior is not always a good indicator of inner spiritual disposition: “Basically, it is almost impossible to discern the dominant operative stage of another person; outward expression is not helpful in explicating another person’s faith stage. Two people may be engaged in similar activities... for very different reasons, and with significantly different understandings of authority and the role of the community.”

Another key point of this chapter in Matthew’s gospel is the unpredictable timing of the last days. The chapter opens with the

disciples asking about when the end will come. Jesus closed the passage cited above with the statement that the timing of the end will not be revealed; therefore, staying awake and alert is the only viable option for the spiritually mature. So if I am working in the field, I work from a disposition of faith in God. If I am grinding meal, I do my work from a disposition of faith in God. I stay awake and alert by living each moment of my life as an expression of faith. My religion finds its fulfillment in spiritual living.

What does it look like to live as a spiritually mature adult? Let’s focus on two characteristics—integrity and vigilance. *Integrity* focus on aligning beliefs and actions, words and deeds, is the mark of integrity. *Vigilance* is recognizing that every second is a graced opportunity.

## **Integrity**

Preaching and teaching will have spiritual punch if they offer practical suggestions for how the members of the congregation might take the message and apply it to the various circumstances of daily living. Helping people to align their beliefs and actions requires intimate knowledge of what daily life in the community looks like. What are the children experiencing a school? What are the working conditions of bosses and employees in businesses in the community? What are the top issues facing families in their homes in this particular community? Preachers and teachers who tirelessly search for answers to these questions will teach with relevance. They will empower the adults in their communities to live with spiritual integrity. People will not only know what they believe, they will know how to believe it, and how to express it on Monday morning and beyond.

## **Vigilance**

There is a certain urgency expressed in the gospels. While there are a number of reasons for this urgency, it is clear that Jesus calls his

followers to live their faith now—to do the right thing right now. Today is the day; leave tomorrow for tomorrow. The kingdom of God is breaking into our lives ceaselessly.

Spiritually mature adults are vigilant about sensing God's presence and responding to it.

Spiritually mature Christian adults: 1) put the needs of others on an equal or greater level than their own; 2) know what they believe; 3) know that relationships are the source of life's greatest joys and value relationships, particularly intimate relationships, above all other pursuits; and 4) know that every moment is a "with-God" moment.

Several other characteristics of spiritually mature Christian adults include: appreciating the ordinary rather than chasing the spectacular, focusing on relationships, prioritizing concern for others over self-preservation, forgiving others, participating in community, being aware of transcendence, and standing in awe of mystery.

## Faith Formation Strategies to Nurture Spiritual Maturity

What can you do to become a congregation that nurtures people to spiritual maturity?

### 1. Shift your Perspective from Teaching to Forming

While one could certainly argue that good teaching is spiritually formative, we will treat teaching and formation as distinct for the sake of emphasis. The purpose of faith formation is to make disciples. Imparting doctrinal knowledge, while essential and important, is never enough for discipleship. In fact, it is secondary. The primary movement of disciple-making is introducing people to how God is calling them to a love relationship every moment of every day. This can be

accomplished in a variety of ways including the following.

- a focus on the life of Jesus as core content
- inspirational story-telling
- an awareness of relationship best practices: in marriage, in extended family, in friendship, in the workplace, in neighborhoods, and in the wider community
- vibrant and engaging worship with full use of symbols
- retreat experiences
- art and drama
- field trips

The doctrinal content of Christianity makes spiritual sense only when it is taught through the dynamic experiences of real life.

### 2. Shift Focus to What Happens Outside the Church Walls

Balance your concern with "on-campus" programs and worship with equal concern for what is happening in the lives of people when they are not on church property. It's my experience that people act differently when they are in a church. We don't always see the true colors of our parishioners. I knew an elderly woman, Judy, for many years, but we only saw each other at church. She was always so kind and proper. One evening, I ran into her at a rock concert at an outdoor amphitheater. As we were talking she was admiring the tattoos on one of the musicians. She said that she and her late husband used to ride motorcycles recreationally. I was surprised to discover that she liked to wear leather and apply temporary tattoos to her exposed skin whenever she rode a motorcycle. She leaned in close to me and whispered in my ear with a playful grin, "I'm a bikin' bitch!"

I tried to look at her as though she just told me, "It is a pleasant day in the park," but I was absolutely floored by what she said and by the context of the statement. I was seeing

an entirely new side of Judy. Back at church the next Sunday, she was the same old kind and proper grandma Judy I had always known. The point is that if I had known this about Judy when I was participating in faith formation programs with her, I would have certainly changed my stories and illustrations in order to capture her imagination. I would have never connected biker spirituality with Judy. Now I know, and I will minister to her differently because of the knowledge.

The different styles of Jesus and Paul emphasize this point. Jesus told stories about sheep, Paul did not. Why? Jesus was speaking to rural people. Paul's ministry was focused in urban centers. They knew the daily routines of their audiences, and they adjusted their approach to faith formation accordingly.

Do you know your congregation? I mean, do you really know your congregation? If you are going to put your finger on the spiritual pulse of your church, you have to know intimately how people live their lives outside of church. Consider spending time participating in community events outside of the church; visiting schools, businesses, hospitals, nursing homes, etc. to see how people are functioning on a day-to-day basis; attending public hearings on local issues.

### 3. Examples, Examples, Examples

Never teach a doctrine without offering examples for how the doctrine can be expressed in the lives of the learners. The examples you offer will be determined by the experiences of your community. If you are teaching in a wealthy suburban community, then your examples need to be rooted in the experiences of living in a wealthy suburban community.

### 4. Witness

Share yourself if you want your hearers to be inspired to share themselves with each other. Connect with your audience by showing how

you have personally invested in the content of what you are teaching. Why does Jesus make a difference in your life? Always answer that question when you teach.

### 5. Invite Sharing

The people in your church will inspire each other if given the chance. Mine the riches of your community by allowing time for learners to become the teachers. Let them tell each other how they live their faith each day. Let them imagine and brainstorm ways to apply the content of a learning session.

### 6. Hold People Accountable

The final word on spiritual maturity is accountability. We are our brother's and sister's keepers. We need to help each other along the journey. An isolated Christian is a Christian heading to the exit door. The close of every program or activity should include an opportunity for participants to commit to some kind of action plan that is focused on the near future. The beginning of every program or activity should include an opportunity for people to share about how their action plan from the previous session worked or didn't work. Be ready to offer suggestions for how to get back on track for those who failed to implement their action plans.

## Conclusion

Spiritual maturity happens in real life, but churches have a significant role to play in the process. Churches leaders need to see themselves in the servant role. Leaders serve the process of spiritual formation by believing that the core formation happens when people are outside a structured program or experience. Once we believe this, we can design programs and activities that are engaging and empowering. Faith formation programs designed to nurture spiritual



maturity help adults live what they believe in every circumstance of daily life.

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