

RECLAIMING CHRISTIANITY

A Practical Model for Spiritual
Growth and Evangelism

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine a young, single mother of two struggling, wanting something better. She decides to “try” church. On Sunday morning she forces herself to get up, feed and dress the children, leave the house on time. She referees a squabble between the two as they proceed to their destination. She’s anxious, not only about her overall situation but also about what will happen next, not knowing whether her expectations will be met. Only the deep desire for something better counters her multiple fears and anxieties.

When she and her children are met by ushers or greeters with a countenance that is warm, confident, and engaging, their positive demeanor lifts her spirits. They recognize her household as having importance and proceed to draw them into the community. Because of their welcome and affirmation, she begins to think that she is in a good place, for what she experiences is a love beyond what is spoken, the kind that touches the soul.

When we are in church, and in the presence of God, we are in a good place; we are in a place of welcome and of spiritual nurture. But why does the church not always feel like a place of spiritual nurture? What is the disconnect between what we know to be true about the church and what far too many experience? What I present in this book is a way to reconnect, a pathway to spiritual

nurture that blossoms into something huge. It is not speculative but based on ministry already underway. After many years of ordained ministry, I have never been more optimistic about the future of Christianity. I find enormous energy, high levels of dedication, and a ready willingness among the faithful. I also find church members know intuitively that institutional conflict over divisive issues—gender and sexuality being the most pressing—prevents us from realizing the very things we most want from church: rich inner spiritual lives; a way to come together to minister to a highly conflicted world; connection with God or the Holy; and deeper connections with our neighbors.

A major thrust in *Reclaiming Christianity* is the strengthening of the spiritual. My own happy discovery is that many faithful and dedicated Christians are strong spiritually. They believe. They care. They work hard and give generously of themselves, their wealth, and their talents. They are repositories of enormous internal spiritual treasure. Yet there is a disconnect between the treasure and wisdom possessed by spiritually engaged Christians, and what many of us experience in Sunday morning worship. Spirituality among Christians is privatized, assumed, and kept under wraps, hidden, internalized, and essentially held in secret. Men and women are happy to talk with one another about personal situations in their families, to talk about deeply held political convictions and their fears about whatever their next life stage holds—but they are rarely comfortable talking about their intimate lives with God. People might, in the privacy of their own thoughts, identify the divine as the source of their spiritual lives—but we too often don't take the next step of exploring how the divine is manifested in our day-to-day lives or in events in our communities.

In these pages, I aim to help readers “unprivatize” their faith. I do this by presenting what I have found to be *an effective way*

of gospel transmission or spiritual transmission. By “spiritual transmission” and “gospel transmission,” I mean the transfer of spirituality—knowledge about, language for, and practices that help us connect with spirituality’s source, power, and guidance—from one person to another. I present a model of Christian formation that can nurture those, like the young mother I just described, who come to church seeking a spiritual foundation, a foundation powerful and clear enough that they can readily begin transmitting it to their children. Equally significant, this model enables those leading the local church—lay and clergy—in a process of spiritual formation and spiritual transmission to enhance their already strong spiritual roots. The process I outline in this book affects every aspect of church life: enhancing vision, preaching, teaching, fellowship, study, outreach, and worship.

The model I present for spiritual transmission is intimately connected to the Bible. I offer a fresh look at Holy Scripture, interpreting it through the lens of love, just as Jesus himself did. Reading scripture as a love story between the divine and creation makes it possible for the Bible to unify Christians—Christians of different denominations and Christians at odds with one another within denominational boundaries. Reading scripture as a love story helps make room for an evangelism that is based on mutual respect for fellow Christians, all the while acknowledging divisive issues. This same mutual respect also acknowledges other religions without compromising gospel integrity. It gives to the faithful a far more comprehensive way to use scripture, especially those parts that are or seem to be harsh or confusing, at odds with what we know to be true, just, and loving.

Since retiring as bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas in 2003, I have had the grand privilege of continuing ministry on both a local and denominational basis. Though my frame of

reference is Episcopalian, what I present can be adapted for other Christians and Christian traditions. And although I write as a priest and bishop, I am writing for lay people as well as clergy. I think it is imperative that lay people join clergy in pursuit of this expanded view of the Christian faith. Indeed, any approach to spiritual transmission, any discussion of the mission of the church that neglects lay people and focuses overly on clergy is surely wrongheaded—and doomed!

I have included questions at the end of each chapter to prompt reflection and discussion about the continuing quest for recovery, renewal, and reclaiming. So, let us begin.



CHAPTER 1

RECLAIMING **SPIRITUALITY**

Where does spirituality come from? That's a theological question as much as it is a historical one, for to explore spirituality from the beginning point is to remember that humans have a spiritual birthright that comes from being made in the divine image. We are engaging spirituality when we experience something that touches the innermost part of a human existence, namely the soul. This spiritual encounter affirms life as of value, gives us an inner security that builds hope for all life, and opens the mind to the presence of something beyond, something that inspires.

Author and theologian Frederick Buechner, in his memoir *Telling Secrets*, describes what he calls “the deepest self”:

Life batters and shapes us in all sorts of ways before it's done, but those original selves which we were born with, and which I believe we continue in some measure to be no matter what, are selves which still echo with the holiness of their origin. I believe that what Genesis suggests is that this original self, with the print of God's

thumb still upon it, is the most essential part of who we are and is buried deep in all of us as a source of wisdom and strength and healing which we can draw upon or, with our terrible freedom, not draw upon as we choose.

Buechner is describing the soul, that part of a human that is the essence of one's being, in which spiritual treasure develops and is stored.

Rooted in each individual's soul, spirituality is lived out in our ordinary, workaday lives, and enacted through our beautiful and broken bodies. Connecting our inner longings, our existential stirrings, and the prayers of our soul to the mind, heart, ears, eyes, and feelings (our emotional or affective lives) is a part of spiritual formation. And, just as spirituality begins in the soul but is expressed through the body, so too it begins with the individual but grows as it becomes a working part of something larger, the church.

In recent times, one of the most inspiring, insightful examples of spiritual treasure comes from the actions and words of the relatives of the people slain inside the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina in June of 2015. *The Washington Post* and other media sources reported that at a bond hearing, the first public appearance of Dylann Roof, the twenty-one-year-old killer, the relatives offered him forgiveness and said they were praying for his soul. "I forgive you," said Nadine Collier, the daughter of seventy-year-old Ethel Lance, as her voice broke with emotion. "You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul." One by one other relatives stood to speak. "I acknowledge that I am very angry," said the sister of slain church member DePayne Middleton-Doctor. "But one thing that DePayne

always enjoined in our family...is she taught me that we are the family that love built. We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive.” The words Jesus spoke from the cross come to mind here: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

It takes spiritual power to make this kind of witness. The relatives’ words of forgiveness reveal a resource that has been accumulated through the years, an inner repository that is constantly held in storage, a life-tool that is always available. Such a witness can be offered by a Christian on a spiritual life pilgrimage, by one who not only has accepted Christ but who has also experienced Christ over time and incorporated those experiences into a personal accumulation of spiritual wealth. And just as those words of forgiveness were the fruit of a long, communal journey of faith, they also can be the loam in which other people’s spiritual journeys take root and grow. While I can’t presume to know the texture of what those Mother Emanuel family members were experiencing, the witness I received from them is one of spiritual depth: they seemed to be relying upon their soul’s health and depth to face a path that otherwise would be one of retained hatred, desire for revenge, and ongoing despair. Their ability to forgive—their soul’s need to forgive—was one step toward healing for them. Their ability to forgive was a powerful sermon of sorts for all listeners.

As happens so frequently, this spiritual treasure wasn’t on exhibit in church, but outside the church—in this case, in a courtroom. It wasn’t spoken as a way to convert but as a healthy way of survival, through a public exposition of faith. In other words, the “sermon” uttered in those words of forgiveness was born, in some deep way, in the church, but was expressed out in the world. This is always the way of Christian spirituality—it moves

between ecclesial spaces and secular spaces, between church space and world space.

Let me cite a personal example of spirituality rooted in the church but taking expression beyond the church's doors. There is no drama to it and it pales in comparison to the account of those family members at the bond hearing—and yet, so often our most abiding spiritual experiences occur in undramatic, even humdrum circumstances. The church I attended as a teenager had a tradition of delivering flowers to shut-ins following Easter services. The beautiful altar flowers would be rearranged into bouquets following the last Easter morning service. I was among several teenagers who would then deliver them. On more than one occasion when I arrived at a home, the widow or widower would open the door and smile upon seeing the flowers. And then, when I told the receiver the flowers were from the church, the person's whole countenance changed—eyes, face, stance—the whole disposition.

In hearing that the church was the source of the flowers, the dear person understood that she (or he) had been remembered and not forgotten. They were not separated and alone but a part of God's greater household and community of faith. They were not formerly worthy, dedicated, and faithful members now sidelined by age and infirmity. They were not bypassed or forgotten. Those flowers carried with them appreciation, love, inclusion, and celebration. The flowers became an outward and visible sign of something deep within that affirmed life—and specifically the Christian life—in all its beauty and power. I was a surrogate of Christ, an ambassador for what the divine wants for people who can no longer live as active a life as when younger. I represented the church, the faith and the divine presence, power and love. The encounter had a holiness, not that the words exchanged were

anything beyond the usual pedestrian expressions, but because of the origin and circumstances of the occasion.

Through that exchange, our souls were fed. The recipient's soul was fed through this special remembrance on the holiest day of the Christian year, when other families gathered and were occupied with their own celebrations. My soul was fed because I had the chance to be a giver—and the chance to be recognized as one bearing Christ. I was a simple teenager, usually invisible in an adult world except among those of my extended family and my own friends. Yet I had been part of an exchange that significantly impacted the life of an older adult, simply because I had been commissioned and sent by my rector for this ministry.

I came to verbalize the depth of that experience only in years after it actually happened; as a teenage flower-deliverer, I had no words to explain, even to myself, the depth of what really transpired. Just the impact was there. Though I didn't know it then, what happened became a part of my spiritual treasure, my inner spiritual strength. Delivering those flowers has been a part of my identity as a Christian. It was a part of the remembered feeling when, some twelve years later, I came to realize Christ's call to Holy Orders, to ordained ministry. The treasure has been a part of me ever since the events occurred.

I didn't understand, at the time of my floral delivery, what had happened. Because I didn't understand that a deep spiritual transaction had occurred, I was not as spiritually strengthened as I could have been. I was unable to identify that what had occurred in that floral exchange was, really, an encounter with Christ. Because I didn't have language with which to make sense of the experience—because I didn't know to name it as a moment of holy exchange—the event was privatized and remained isolated within me, out of reach of even my inner vocabulary.

The experience was real and profound, but was truncated by my own inability to give shape in language to what had occurred.

When the church fails to name and interpret the holiness in our midst, we fail to nurture members at their most important point of need. My experience of delivering flowers as a teenager, and only later reflecting on and being able to see the deeper meaning of the experience, illustrates a pattern that I believe is fundamental to the Christian spiritual life: We grow spiritually through encounter followed by reflection. This pattern appears throughout scripture—consider the resurrection account from the Emmaus story (Luke 24:13-35). On an open road two men are joined by a third who opens scripture to them and explains how it reveals Jesus. Only after this man blesses and breaks the bread at a meal and then disappears do the remaining two realize that they have encountered the risen Lord. “Were not our hearts burning within us,” they say to each other. Something profound had happened. It had been unpredictable beforehand, and there was no indication it could happen again. Yet it changed their lives. This is the nature of the spiritual. It occurs when the unexpected evolves in quite natural ways, and its importance is magnified afterward. For these two men the experience does not end in Emmaus. They return to Jerusalem to tell the disciples what has happened. They share their story, and in that sharing the souls of all hearers are fed. For these two men, it is the second feeding of the day.

To cite still another example, C. S. Lewis has been a source of inspiration for millions of Christians, all stemming from his conversion, his discovery of the soul. Andrea Monda, in her article “The Conversion Story of C. S. Lewis,”¹ says of him:

¹ Published in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, July 16, 2008, 4

[His] intelligence was subtle, his curiosity boundless, his acumen amazing, his dialectic power exceptional; yet something came into play that shattered his seemingly firm belief in the inexistence of God, for in life there is always something else, something unforeseen, unnoticed, or surprising.

Monda quotes Lewis:

You must picture me alone in that room at Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.

Lewis was touched by the divine, and was able to “admit”—that is, reflect on—what had happened; thus he claimed his spiritual birthright.

Spiritual encounter followed by deepening spiritual understanding is a fundamental pattern of the Christian life. And it is a fundamental call of the church to be a place where people can share in that pattern together. Preaching, teaching, praying, serving community needs, and advocating for justice are tools to help people identify their spiritual experiences and to put into practice what spirituality directs. Like a seed that needs soil, water, and light, spirituality grows best as it is shared with others within the community of faith, simultaneously nurturing the speaker and those who hear.

My wife and I have a back porch that faces the rising sun. Since there is a vacant field immediately to the east, we can watch the rays of the almost visible sun reflect on low-lying clouds, all of which make a beautiful sunrise. What actually happens, as the sunlight illumines clouds, creates such a moving scene—some mornings, it practically defies speech. Yet this kind of sight displays a beautiful majesty that points to something more than sunlight hitting particles of moisture in the air. It points to the divine. This recognition reflects a prayer from the *Episcopal Book of Common Prayer*: “Open, O Lord, the eyes of all people to behold thy gracious hand in all thy works, that rejoicing in thy whole creation, they may honor thee with their substance, and be faithful stewards of thy bounty” (329). But if people only see a beautiful sunrise, and not a revelation of its divine source, their lives and their potential spiritual wealth are diminished. It is my fervent prayer that this book will help the church help people see all the sunsets for what they are—testimony to their Maker; sermons of praise to the Creator and Redeemer of all.

DEVELOPING SPIRITUAL TREASURE

Over the many centuries of its history, the church has developed practices of spiritual nurture and spiritual transmission. Here I’ll look at several practices, already flourishing in many churches, that very effectively help people develop their spiritual treasure: Bible study, spiritual direction, faith-sharing venues, and renewal ministries of various types.

Most foundationally, the spiritual is nurtured through Bible study. In small-group Bible study, participants are fed not only by their encounter with scripture but also by the opportunity to connect with other people. Bible study, then, works on two levels, immersing participants in God’s revelation to the church

and giving people a chance to know—and love—their neighbors. The same can be said for study and prayer groups. Participants focus not only on what they seek to understand but also develop bonds of affection, faith, mutual concern, and support for themselves—and often for many beyond. They share spiritual experience and build spiritual treasure.

The rise in the practice of spiritual direction is another effort to nurture the soul and feed spiritual hunger. As Liz Budd Ellmann, former executive director of Spiritual Directors International, writes on that organization's website, "Spiritual direction explores a deeper relationship with the spiritual aspect of being human. Simply put, spiritual direction is helping people tell their sacred stories every day." Spiritual direction offers a means to address people's spiritual hunger on a personal one-by-one basis, and it can be especially useful when people feel there is something missing from their spiritual lives

Ellman continues:

Spiritual direction has emerged in many contexts using language specific to particular cultural and spiritual traditions. Describing spiritual direction requires putting words to a process of fostering a transcendent experience that lies beyond all names, and yet the experience longs to be articulated and made concrete in everyday living. It is easier to describe what spiritual direction does than what spiritual direction is. Our role is not to define spiritual direction, but to describe the experience.

It's important to underscore that spiritual direction is built upon individuals' spiritual treasures. It helps individuals understand,

appreciate, and use the treasure already within them in the building of a holier and fruitful life.

Another practice that can help foster a deeper, more articulate spirituality is Sharing Faith dinners, which are becoming more popular in several Episcopal dioceses. They are fashioned after Houston Interfaith Ministries' Amazing Faith Dinner Dialogues, which began in 2007. Then mayor Bill White wanted to discover ways to promote dialogue and education across ethnic and religiously diverse segments of the population. The Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee began a similar effort in 2013. Carol Barnwell, director of communication for the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, spearheaded the adoption of this model for church use in 2012 and invited other dioceses to join in the effort. "It's funny that we have to plan an evening to talk to friends about our faith, but each time I've done Sharing Faith, it's been a gift," says Barnwell. "To enjoy the hospitality of people I may not know is always lovely. And to hear the very personal experiences of God from others is a humbling experience. Each time, I feel like I've received a gift, and each story allows me to see God in a new way."

Telling spiritual stories—stories of living encounter with the Living God—is vital for the spiritual life. The principle aim of such storytelling is not to convert hearers. Instead, the story is an occasion to express gratitude for the divine as it relates to humans in their struggles and ambitions. There is a humility in the process. Precious, life-lifting, powerfully insightful and therefore very personal stories are given air time. In the ordinary hustle and bustle of life, most people are reluctant to reveal this much of their inner life. There is little place to share something so highly personal. Thus, if these stories are not shared, the spirituality that undergirds them remains submerged.

Renewal movements also provide an avenue of spiritual nurture. Cursillo, a method developed by Roman Catholics and now used by many denominations, gathers people for four days in a setting where lectures are interspersed with conversation among participants. When I attended years ago, I found it very powerful. A similar renewal movement in the Episcopal Church is Faith Alive, a kind of lay witness ministry where a team is developed from Christians outside a congregation who come for a weekend to share stories of faith with parishioners. It too is very powerful, giving enormous energy to congregations in the afterglow of the weekend. Happening, designed for youth, is similar in scope. Still another renewal movement is Alpha, developed by Holy Trinity Brompton, a Church of England parish in London. It too is communal, utilizes faith-sharing stories, and has had broad ecumenical use worldwide.

So God continues to work in and for the church and, of course, God continues to work beyond the church. For instance, a well-known and highly respected non-church ministry that is built upon the spiritual is Alcoholics Anonymous. AA embraces reliance on a “higher power.” Not incidentally, its centerpiece is the sharing of faith stories. AA thus confirms that God works everywhere and honors those who turn to the divine, regardless of whether they are church-ed. We Christians can celebrate the ongoing work and presence of God that occur beyond the church and help others come to see God’s work around them.

There are delightful stories of how God works on those who have given up on their Christian identity. One example that moves me is the story of the late Harley Swiggum. In the course of World War II Swiggum was a part of the American military effort in the Pacific. He found himself stationed on Saipan as the front line of conflict moved onward. He had nothing to read in

English except a Bible. So even though he had dropped out of church, Swiggum started reading.

What he encountered was completely at odds with what he had experienced in the church of his childhood. In scripture he experienced a spiritual awakening and way of life that was not present in his early Christian upbringing. As contrasted to a church culture highly centered on the do's and don't's of life, through scripture he found a liberating spirituality articulated in scripture that led him into a life of inner strength and a calling to bless others through what he himself had received. Inspired by what he found in scripture, Swiggum came to an adult faith and was later ordained in the Lutheran tradition. In a desire to make scripture more readily available to people, he authored the Bethel Bible Series, which became a huge ecumenical tool for the study of God's Word.

Another story of the divine working in the lives of those beyond the church comes from the life of Phillip Jackson. He grew up in Chicago in a family that was nominally Unitarian. Phillip went to Amherst for his undergraduate degree and earned a law degree from Yale. Guaranteed a position in a major Chicago law firm, he exercised an option of waiting a year to begin work, with the only stipulation of employment being that he pass the bar exam. In his own words, he decided to go to Hawaii to "chill out" in the aftermath of years in school.

Arriving in Hawaii, he enjoyed it so much that he wanted to stay. Looking for work, he joined a small firm of five attorneys. He enjoyed the partners and liked the work, except that after three years he felt something was missing in his life. He reasoned that his job was essentially helping people either make money or keep it, or both. Then came the nagging question to himself, "Can I do this for the next thirty years"? Enter angst. Then came an

inner voice saying, “You need to go to church.” Since Phillip had a childhood connection to the Unitarian Church, he went there, but did not find anything that made him want to return. The next week while stopped at a traffic light, he noticed a church on the corner and heard an inner voice, “Go there.” Reading the service time, he decided to follow the prompting.

Attending St. Clement’s Episcopal Church the next Sunday, he discovered “a language that he had always known and could perfectly understand but couldn’t explain why.” It was the language of faith, for which his soul was hungry, and he liked it. Sunday by Sunday he took a back row pew until one Sunday the priest asked, “Who are you and what are you doing here?” Thus began a series of lunches between them, leading Phillip finally to say, “I don’t think I can practice law for the rest of my life.” The priest then said to him, “You are going to be a priest.” Phillip recognized that he had been introduced to a vocation that matched his soul’s need.

From there he was mentored by a family with three children and given John Stott’s *Basic Christianity* to read. This led him to the response, “Lord, I give myself to you.” This acknowledgment and acceptance of his conversion led next to his baptism. A week later his rector took him to see the bishop about the possibility of becoming a priest. The bishop told him to work for two years as a new Christian and return to talk again.

One evening some six weeks later Phillip prayed, “Lord, tell me what you want, and I’ll do it.” The next day, quite unexpectedly, the bishop called and wanted to see him again. At that meeting, the bishop said, “I’ve changed my mind. I want you to go to seminary this fall.” Thus began a new trajectory that led to ordination and a life filled with the joy of ministry in an ordained capacity. Phillip now serves as vicar of Trinity Church, Wall Street, in New York

City. He is a priest because a divine call came to him completely outside any Christian church. He has experienced encounter after encounter since hearing the voice directing him to go to church. His story is testimony to the unlimited reach of Christ's action outside the church as well as within. Phillip has spiritual treasure, and it grows every time he tells his story of faith. And every time he tells his story, reminding listeners that the divine call can come to anyone at any time.

At the General Convention in 2015, the Rt. Rev. Michael B. Curry, then bishop of North Carolina, was elected presiding bishop for the entire Episcopal Church. His consistent and passionate focus has been to challenge the Episcopal Church to become a part of the Jesus Movement. The thrust of this movement is to place energy and attention into bringing what the church says and does more in line with what Jesus said and did. Bishop Curry defines the Jesus Movement as “following Jesus into loving, liberating, and life-giving relationships with God, with each other, and with the earth,” and he calls upon Episcopalians to be evangelists, reconcilers, and conveners for conversation. This is a tremendously hopeful sign for Episcopalians and is already inspiring movement toward renewal in all its dimensions.

The initiatives described in this chapter, and many more not mentioned, indicate a slow but very sure and hopeful shift toward the renewal of Christianity in the church and in the world.

STRENGTHENING SPIRITUAL TRANSMISSION

The call of God—the eruption of the holy—may come in an epiphany, alone on a solitary walk, or in private, inner wrestlings. It may occur in conversation with another or others. But if there is only a solitary aspect to the relationship of any one believer and God, then spirituality and the spiritual treasure it creates is not

nurtured well. Christian spirituality, operating on the grounds of a God who lives fundamentally in community with God's own self, by definition should not remain private. The spiritual is akin to love; it exists in the context of contact with others. It grows with continued contact. Spirituality is about heart and soul, about feelings and perceptions. It is about encounter, not information. Theology is not a source of the spiritual but rather the means of pointing to its reality, explaining it after the fact.

Thus, the church desperately needs a model of gospel transmission that honors the loam of solitude in which much spirituality originally roots but also recognizes the fundamentally communal and relational nature of spirituality. Furthermore, the church needs to cultivate practices of transmission that are keyed to fruitfulness and nurture in addition to productivity and success. At present our entire culture, secular and sacred, considers education as the way to address human needs and to create a productive society. It has been so supremely effective that modern society in Western countries has become highly skilled through all kinds of technological breakthroughs. People continue to be impressed and even awed by countless successes. As a society, people are a living legacy of the supremacy of the rational that the philosopher René Descartes put forth in his famous dictum, "I think and therefore I am." Carried to its conclusion, this precept elevates the mind and the rational to the exclusion of all else—to the exclusion of prayer, spiritual practice, and acts of faith and service. Existential rumination and nurture of the soul have been sidelined by modern secular society. But existential rumination and nurture of the soul are specialties of the church.

Consequently the field is wide open for Christians to implement a model of individual development by rooting it in what ordinary education does not furnish, namely those ties that bind

people together, including the spiritual. Like love, spirituality is transmitted primarily by relationship. There are practical, even utilitarian, reasons for Christians to care about spiritual transmission. Spirituality is the church's greatest working and mission resource. So the very future of Christianity necessitates strengthening this singularly precious asset. Furthermore, in order to be more humane and just, society needs a stronger spiritual element. But there is an even deeper reason for the church to pursue a robust and organic practice of spiritual growth and spiritual transmission: The spiritual life is what we were made for. In other words, for the church to pursue "institutional survival" without pursuing spiritual vigor is wrong-headed in two ways at once. It's impossible, since the very thing that can make the church grow is spiritual vitality; and even if it were possible, it would be the tail wagging the dog, since the church exists not because God wants an institution but because God wants a cradle of spiritual nurture.

Thus, Christian formation must provide a way to pursue the sharing of faith stories, spiritual disciplines, and the integration of gospel content with faith experience at the heart of congregational life. I adopted such an approach to Christian formation years ago as rector of St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Houston. I recruited a team of lay people and trained them to be mentors for newcomers to the church in Inquirers' Classes. We gathered for discussion and study. Faith sharing at tables worked in tandem with lectures on the Christian faith, tying together experience and reflection upon the experience. The first element was providing a comfortable, safe place for conversation. This included time for getting acquainted with each other, and verbal assurance that there would be no element of judgment that would create a "me versus you" hierarchy in relationships. This established trust, the necessary springboard from which in-depth sharing could take place. At the conclusion

of these sessions, newcomers so inclined were baptized or took vows of renewal. Each year, the mentors told me they had never experienced anything more spiritually rewarding in church.

The beauty and power of this model resides, in large measure, in peer learning and sharing among newcomers who are led by more seasoned members of the church. As they share stories of faith and personal spiritual practices, newcomers (and, indeed, also seasoned church members) are led to examine their own lives through the experiences of others. In that process they become inspired. At the same time they begin a bonding process with each other that counters the isolation so many feel, exemplified by the expression “alone in a crowd.”

Nothing feeds my soul or adds to my own spiritual treasure more than being part of such a ministry. It gives me so much confidence that I no longer grieve about the marginalization of religion in secular culture. The recovery of a vital, attractive Christianity undergirded by increased spiritual energy is precisely what modern culture needs; the possibility that this straightforward ministry of Christian sharing and edification gives me a happy thrill and a hopeful heart.

FINAL THOUGHTS

It’s a wonderful and fearful responsibility Christians have—the responsibility to enable other people to discover their own spiritual birthright and the existence of their souls. The aim of this book is to inspire members of our churches to act from a posture of confidence—and not from a posture of fear of decline—asking, “Is my church doing all it can to offer the treasures of Christianity to a world in need of spiritual nurture? And is my church doing all it can to help burnish the spiritual treasure already in our midst?”

REFLECT AND RESPOND

- ◆ In what ways do you identify with spiritual treasure?
- ◆ Is the concept of spiritual treasure attractive to you?
- ◆ How does spiritual transformation take place in your congregation?
- ◆ In what ways do you share your own spirituality or encounters with the divine, and with whom?
- ◆ How is your spirituality nurtured? When alone? With others?
- ◆ What is your definition of the soul and how is it tied to spirituality?
- ◆ How do you explain the increase of people who identify with no religion, or who claim to be spiritual but not religious? Are you or your congregation doing anything to address this? Is it ever a topic of discussion?