

Tending the Soul

of the Congregation



Spiritual Exercises for Church Leaders

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Tending the Soul of the Congregation is written by Rev. Stephen D. Bryant, publisher of Upper Room Ministries and Associate General Secretary, Discipleship Ministries.

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INVITATION

The Upper Room, like the local church, yearns to meet people where they are. And we are particularly keen to encourage spiritual leaders who are seeking nurture and care as they lead others on the path that leads to life. We understand sometimes it's difficult to find grounding beneath the shifting sands of our world and culture. We realize that people in our faith communities wonder if there is a safe place to be vulnerable. And many of us long to develop the spiritual practice and empathy that support a call to action and justice.

The staff and extended community of The Upper Room are experiencing the challenges of leading in a world that no longer automatically turns to the church as authority or guide. We are hearing a call to walk alongside those who are longing for deeper spirituality amidst the turmoil and complexity of the world.

This booklet is an invitation to join the journey with us at The Upper Room Center for Christian Spiritual Formation. It is an invitation to be attentive to the One who loves us, to recognize the sacred in the everyday experiences, and to find the courage to live faithful lives. If this booklet meets you where you are, please connect with us at <https://www.upperroom.org/from-the-center>.

Stephen Bryant, Publisher
The Upper Room Center for Christian Spiritual Formation

TENDING THE SOUL OF THE CONGREGATION

Spiritual Exercises for Church Leaders

Are you longing for spiritual vitality in your church? If so, The Upper Room invites you to use this resource to engage your church leaders (or your entire congregation) in a series of spiritual readings and reflection exercises. The exercises are designed to be conversation starters that will help us shift from being anxious about the church's future to being open and available to God's love and longing for the people we are sent to serve. As spiritual leaders, it is mission-critical that we ground ourselves in spiritual practices that will strengthen our congregations during challenging times. We must tend to the *soul* of the congregation, to the heart of our call of being disciple-making congregations. May we be open to the Spirit who is the source and guide for all ministry that matters.

Session I: Choose the **pilgrimage** of faith

Session II: Increase attentiveness to God's **presence**

Session III: Develop regular spiritual **practice**

Session IV: Experience God's **power** for healing resurrection

Session V: Become **partners** with companions along the way

Session I

CHOOSE THE
PILGRIMAGE OF
FAITH

*Spiritual leaders guide people toward
maturing in the Christian life.*

“We will surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness . . . [and] pray . . . that they may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life.”

—*The United Methodist Hymnal,
Baptismal Covenant 1*

Forty years ago, a religious researcher named Jean Haldane concluded an analysis of laity in congregational life with a revolutionary insight that only today is more fully taking hold. She writes, with respect to a particular church judged strong by most measures of the day, “It is obvious that the major goal of St. Columbia’s [Church] . . . is to help people belong [and be active], and without exception everyone wants to keep this intact. But now the possibility of a second task is raised—that of assisting people on their spiritual journeying. The problem is that all of the present

leadership resources are directed toward the first goal . . . But for me it is becoming increasingly important that the churches help people with their spiritual journeys—and perhaps this should be the primary task of our day” (Jean Haldane, *Religious Pilgrimage*, Alban Institute, 1977).

Becoming a disciple-making church means making our primary task that of “assisting people on their spiritual journeying.” It means redirecting resources and reordering church life around pathways for helping people become mature as disciples of Jesus Christ. It means shifting from a functional to a formational vision of ministry that impacts how each and every group or committee goes about its work.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul clearly names his primary task and driving passion: “. . . that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me” (Colossians 1:28-29). If we’re going to be a disciple-making church, we need to ask ourselves: For what do *we* toil and struggle? What would it mean to focus our work on how to best assist people with their spiritual journeying?

Making the main thing people’s spiritual walk and their progress on the Christian journey means rethinking church. For example, people on a spiritual journey may not need a menu of activities to choose from as much as they need a map of the journey to the promised land—the love of God and neighbor. What are the various pathways and way stations you offer for following Jesus to fuller life with God for people at each stage of the journey?

Becoming a disciple-making church challenges us to be *spiritual* leaders because we must do our own inner work if we want to help others with theirs. We cannot lead others where we have never been or give others the grace we never received for ourselves. We must choose to embrace our lives as a pilgrimage of faith. We need to learn together from scripture and Wesleyan tradition about how the Spirit works in people's lives (prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace) and how most people experience stages on the spiritual journey. Above all, we must gain insight into where we are on our own journeys: Where is God challenging us to grow, to serve, or to move on? Where are we stuck? What gift has God given us? Who can help us stop pretending and be honest with God and with ourselves?

Readings for Reflection

Which readings stir something in you? What insight and challenge do you hear?

“For too long, The United Methodist Church has looked for a quick fix to help guide our discipleship efforts, and it is not working. We have lost our focus on intentional discipleship, we have forgotten the reasons why we said “yes” to Jesus, and we ourselves have stopped growing as disciples. We have forgotten that being on a path of discipleship is a life-long journey of growth and maturing. I believe a renewed focus on making disciples will be a better investment of our time, money, and resources. Our focus must

move away from “fixing” churches, toward making and growing disciples!”

—Junius Dotson, *An Invitation to Intentional Discipleship and Healthy Discipleship Systems*

“It is this vagueness about the ends of ministry that is killing us . . . the fundamental aim of ordained ministry is to guide parishioners toward maturing in the Christian life.”

—Neill Hamilton, *Maturing in the Christian Life*

“We make disciples as we: proclaim the gospel . . . lead persons to commit their lives to God . . . nurture persons in Christian living . . . send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ. . . .

—*United Methodist Book of Discipline 2016*, Paragraph 122

“I am more convinced than ever that the preaching like an apostle without the joining together those who are awakened, and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer.”

—John Wesley

“By its very nature, the church is an ecology of spiritual care and guidance. It is the decisive context for spiritual formation. Spiritual guidance and care in the congregation must be ongoing and consistent, woven into the very fabric of all that happens rather than presented on sporadic occasions as a new program.”

—Suzanne Johnson, *Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom*

Spiritual Exercises

Make time as a group to try one of these spiritual exercises together. Each exercise will, in its own way, challenge you to consider your image of the spiritual journey and the “pathways” for companionship, learning, or engagement that your faith community currently offers.

Read Hebrews 12:15

“See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God . . .”

How do you “see to it” that *everyone* experiences and grows in God’s grace, that *no one* fails to obtain the gift of God’s grace? Sketch out a map of the ways your church seeks to do this; for example, in relation to each age group.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:17-18

“All of us . . . are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.”

Paul views Christian life as progressive, beginning with the glory of our origin in God, then our awakening to the glory of God’s love for us all in Christ crucified. How would you then describe the next “degrees of glory” in the journey toward becoming Christ-like? Think of ways your church supports people’s maturing in each phase.

Read Mark 3:13-15

“He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him . . . to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message. . . .”

The story of Jesus’ calling the twelve apostles also illustrates three phases of the discipleship journey and of the church’s work. Jesus calls us to come to him, to be with him, and to be sent out. How do you in your church actively support people’s responsiveness to Christ’s call to lifelong discipleship through ministries of inviting (“they came to him”), forming (“to be with him”), and sending (“to be sent out”)?

Read Colossians 1:28-29

“. . . that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.”

For what do you and your church toil and struggle? What would it look like if you were to invest your creativity and resources in each and every person’s maturing in Christ?

Session II

INCREASE ATTENTIVENESS TO GOD'S PRESENCE

Spiritual leaders invite openness to God's presence.

“New every morning is your love, great God of light, and all day long you are working for good in the world. Stir up in us desire to serve you, to live peacefully with our neighbors, and to devote each day to your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ the Lord.”

—“A Liturgy for Morning Prayer,”
Upper Room Worshipbook

Spiritual vitality in our churches stems from our openness to God's transforming presence, not in anxious striving over members, money, and maintenance. Indeed, there is much work to be done; and it requires our attention. But we must balance the outer work with the inner work. Inner work begins with carving out the space and time required to center ourselves in God. When we do this, and when

we've yielded afresh to the persuasions of the "Love at the heart of things" (Douglas Steere), we return to the work of the day reordered, more aware and more attuned to the gracious presence of the One who calls us forward.

Tending the soul of the congregation starts with attending to God's presence in our lives as leaders, then bringing the same prayerful openness into the meetings and ministries of the church. The opening to the Springs of living water must be maintained or else the streams will run dry.

Parker Palmer once wrote, "Many of us and our congregations are guilty of 'functional atheism.' Though our language pays lip service to God, our actions assume that God does not exist or is in a coma. Functional atheism is the belief that nothing is happening unless we are making it happen" (*Weavings*, no. 1, vol. 1, 1986).

I can identify. Can you? One way we can overcome the functional atheism that routinely sets in is by regularly engaging in prayerful reflection on scripture and spiritual conversation, or what John Wesley called "Christian conferencing." Such conversations are a form of spiritual exercise for the body of Christ. On the way to Emmaus, Jesus joined two disciples in conversation about the things that were happening around them. The conversation continues today and remains a source of new life for us as it was for them. Returning to it whenever we meet is one of the ways we maintain our connection with the living Christ among us and remain spiritually alert.

Spiritual conversation is especially important for leadership teams and ministry groups when we are seeking to

be a disciple-making church. We can get so lost in what *we* are doing and how *we* will make people into disciples—so intent are we to do well and to make a difference for Christ! And yet it is the risen Christ who calls the people to discipleship, joins them on their journeys, and changes the direction of their lives. Our work is to help the people to pay attention to, listen to, learn from, and live in the Spirit. Spiritual conversation helps us to help one another pay attention, to discern the voice of Christ sounding through the many voices.

So where do we begin? One way is to make spiritual conversation a regular practice. Whenever you gather in a meeting or for a ministry, begin by asking: Where have you noticed God's presence or heard God's call during the week? Do this each time you meet, and give the group a few minutes for conversation. People will eventually catch on. Let the question become an expectation that will cause people to wonder and be watching for signs of God's presence between meetings.

A second way is to draw from one of the spiritual readings or exercises below. A few moments to ponder a reading followed by a spiritual exercise can leaven an otherwise lifeless meeting with new meaning. This practice of reading and reflecting can enliven our common life and deepen our deliberations.

Readings for Reflection

Which readings stir something in you? What insight and challenge do you hear?

“Openness to God happens whenever we experience wonder, curiosity, compassion, love, or beauty. It happens when we suffer. Any life experience that causes us to long for meaning, for transcendence, for whatever is of God’s character opens us to God. This is true whether we are religious or nonreligious, individuals or communities. God chooses to work collaboratively and co-creatively with us wherever we are open. And as Jesus teaches in the parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32), even a tiny degree of faith is enough for God to initiate a process that will in time become an astounding work of loving transformation. In this way, God makes all things new.”

—Elaine Heath, *God Unbound*

“Many of us and our congregations are guilty of ‘functional atheism.’ Though our language pays lip service to God, our actions assume that God does not exist or is in a coma. Functional atheism is the belief that nothing is happening unless we are making it happen.”

—Parker Palmer, *Weavings*

“To live the life of prayer means to emerge from [our] drowse, to awaken to the communing, guiding, healing, clarifying, and transforming current of God’s Holy Spirit in which [we are] immersed.”

—Douglas Steere, *Dimensions of Prayer*

“To contemplate is to see; and to minister is to make visible [the presence of God in the world].”

—Henri Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome*

“There is that near you which will guide you; O wait for it, and be sure to keep to it.”

—Isaac Penington

Spiritual Exercises

Make time as a group to take up one of these spiritual exercises. Attend to where you, as spiritual leaders of your church, are noticing God’s presence and hearing Christ’s call.

Read Genesis 28:10-18

“Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!”

God comes to Jacob in a God-forsaken place in his life. Where, looking back, do you now recognize God’s hand in your life in a way you didn’t at the time? Or where lately have you, like Jacob, been surprised by grace? Share with one another.

Reflect on the parts of your church or your church life you most strongly associate with a sense of God’s presence; or with a sense of God’s absence. Share your stories.

Who do you know that is living stuck in a God-forsaken place and needs to hear your story of how “the Lord is in this place,” even though you didn’t recognize or know it?

Read Isaiah 43:19 (NIV)

“See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?”

This word of hope comes to Israel in a time of desolation. Where do you sense a spirit of desolation in your church or community? Where do you feel hopeless, that all is lost—that we’re at the end of our rope?

Re-read the words of Isaiah again and listen prayerfully. Look within yourself and outside of yourself with the eyes of your heart. Where do you perceive the new thing God is doing? Where do you notice seeds of promise? Share your perceptions with one another.

Read John 21:1

“After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way.”

In John 20, after the resurrection, Jesus the risen Lord shows up multiple times in multiple ways—in the midst of his followers’ grief and despair, fear, doubt, and futility. Where and when has the risen Christ showed up in your experience and in what ways? Where and to whom among the people of your congregation is the Lord showing up? Go, ask, and listen to one another.

Session III

DEVELOP REGULAR SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Spiritual leaders build spiritual practice.

“The wind of God is always blowing,
but we must hoist our sails.”

—Douglas Steere

Yes, opening to the Spirit is the key to church vitality, as stated in the previous section. But *remaining* open requires spiritual discipline, especially in those parts of our lives where we tend to be closed to God and need change. Spiritual practices (spiritual disciplines or means of grace) are like sails. We hoist our sails with intent to live under the sway of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, rather than under the sway of other forces competing for influence.

A discipline of regular prayer, for example, is for me a way to reserve an available space for God at the center of my being which will otherwise fill up with the voices of any number of all-consuming concerns. Regular prayer

provides discipline for even the possibility of a listening heart attuned to the voice of the risen Christ.

Really seeing the people around us is a practice that can help us curb our tendency to be in too big a hurry to see and honor the people in our path. Walking to work or down the halls of our workplace with a verse of scripture helps me see people through the eyes of Christ rather than through my own first impressions. My favorite verse for this practice is: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11), from the story of Jesus’ baptism. Having that verse running through my mind helps me to really see people, to see them as God saw Jesus, and as Jesus would see and relate to the people he met along life’s way. The practice transforms my vision and my response; sometimes it opens me to an encounter. Without this discipline, I hardly see at all.

Tending the soul of the congregation involves fostering spiritual practice among the people so that we as a body have eyes to see and ears to hear (Matthew 13:16). Prayer, searching the scripture, and service are means of entering into and sharing the heart, mind, and work of Christ. A balanced spiritual practice helps us get in step with the transforming rhythm of Jesus’ life with God: work and worship, engagement and rest, service and Sabbath, contemplation and action. “Spiritual formation in the local church,” according to well-known pastor and retreat leader Larry Peacock, “is the focused attention we give to this rhythm of withdrawal and return” (*Heart and Soul*).

Sometimes in the church we get religious programming and spiritual practice all mixed up. When that happens, the

goal of getting more people more involved in more activities can become an end in itself and displace the true goal of any program, which is to engage people in ways of being attentive and responsive to the presence of the Lord in their lives. How can we design church programs that will facilitate a fuller participation in the heart, mind, and work of Christ during the weekdays?

If we want to be a disciple-making church, our goal must be to help people find a spiritual practice for staying awake and alive to God. People need opportunities to try out the practices John Wesley categorized as “works of piety” and “works of mercy”—the means of grace for growing in the love of God and neighbor as God’s beloved.

Readings for Reflection

Which readings stir something in you? What insight and challenge do you hear?

“Spiritual disciplines are not ways to prove our righteousness. They are a way of fostering trust in and receptivity to God. They make room for grace to operate in our lives.”

—Marjorie J. Thompson and Stephen D. Bryant, *Exploring the Way, Leader’s Guide*

“Spirituality is the experience of the presence of God. Spiritual practices are those attitudes or activities that open a person to the experience of the presence of God. The ones that first come to mind are prayers, meditation, reading the Bible, and attending church. In recent years many

Christians have been adding to the list so that we now think of a walk in the woods, sitting in a sunny window with a cup of tea, or even knitting as spiritual practices. Anything that allows us to be still or to focus our attention on the Holy One can be a spiritual practice. Anything we come back to day after day, anything to which we give our attention, can be a spiritual practice. Washing dishes, walking the dog, even taking out the trash.”

—Jeanette Stokes, *The Upper Room Disciplines*

“A life with God is a life in which the rhythms of silence and listening alternate with the rhythms of sharing and service. By praying with every part of who we are, we allow the grace that pours from the well of living water to trickle through all the aspects of our being, nourishing and hydrating that which was parched and dis-eased. So begin the adventure, start the journey, follow Jesus. Allow God to transform your mind such that everything you are and everything your encounter speaks with the breath of the Spirit.” —Daniel Wolpert, *Creating a Life with God*

“The means of grace are means by which persons experience and respond to the loving presence of God. All means of grace have as their end the life of love, the Christian life.” —Hal Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life*

“There is a rhythm to Jesus’ life. He is immersed in ordinary life: speaking words of hope, healing painful wounds, telling stories . . . eating with sinners. He also withdraws from the

clutter and ambiguity of life in order to reflect on the movements of the Spirit and touch again the Mysterious One. . . . Spiritual formation in the local church is the focused attention we give to this rhythm of withdrawal and return.”

—Larry Peacock, *Heart and Soul*

“Early Methodists asked the question, ‘How goes it with your soul?’ By creating small groups where this kind of sharing could happen, the Wesleys encouraged growth in discipleship . . . Such social holiness [spiritual communities] . . . shapes social conscience [engagement with the world].”

—Trevor Hudson and Jerry Haas, *The Cycle of Grace*

“The church exists first and foremost to praise and glorify God . . . So for us prayers, meditations, Bible reading are not peripheral to our operations. These things are at the centre of our lives . . . Our pattern and example is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who could be the man for others only because he was first and foremost a man of God, a man of prayer.”

—Desmond Tutu, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace*

Spiritual Exercises

Make time as a group to try one of the spiritual exercises together. What is a practice that helps you stay centered in God or strengthens you as a Christian disciple? What practices are most important to the vitality of your church?

Read Acts 2:41-47

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

Note the practices that mark spiritual vitality in the early church. Which are your strengths as a church? Which, if given more attention, would nourish and deepen your life together and your ministry in Christ?

Read Luke 4:15-19

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to . . .”

Luke tells us that Jesus lived by the leading of the Spirit to incarnate God’s love. Reflect on his way of walking through the world with his followers. What inward practices sustained him and his life in the Spirit? What outward practices? What shared practices shaped and sustained his life in community with his disciples? Reflect on which of Jesus’ practices are also happening in the inner frame of your church’s life.

Read Mark 6:30-32

“The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.”

Mark shows us here how Jesus invited the disciples to participate in the rhythm of action, reflection, and prayer that shaped his life with God. Where is this rhythm evident in your meetings and ministries? What differences does it make?

Session IV

EXPERIENCE GOD'S POWER FOR HEALING RESURRECTION

*Spiritual leaders foster availability to the God who
sends us forth in the power of the Spirit.*

Roman emperor Hadrian in the second century sent an envoy named Aristides to scope out the Christians and write a report on what sort of people they were, having heard rumors they ate flesh and drank blood. Upon returning, Aristides reported, “These Christians are certainly a different kind of people. When someone comes to them hungry, they share what they have; if they don’t have enough, they fast so as to have enough for all. When someone is without home, they take them in and treat them like family, including orphans and widows. In fact, they treat our own people better than we do ourselves, caring for our sick and burying our dead.” Aristides concluded, “The Christians are a new kind of people. There is something divine about them.”

How do we become such a people, “a new kind of people”? Not by accident, not overnight, nor in isolation.

The journey of becoming “a new kind of people” is a joint venture with the Holy Spirit. With our cooperation, the Spirit lowers the threshold of our resistance to the new life God offers. Step by step, we become increasingly available to the gift of “power from on high” for carrying on the mission (Luke 24:49). Douglas Steere reminds us, “Spiritual growth is increasing abandon to the great gulf stream of God’s love.” As Aristides saw, that kind of joyful abandon marked early Christian life. That’s what maturing in the Christian life looks like.

The journey of discipleship is not only about individual transformation; the congregation undergoes transformation as well. We become *a new kind of people*, not only new persons. As we labor together to become a school of Christian discipleship for the sake of others, Christ transforms us in our life together. As new people come into our lives, Christ challenges our perceptions of the people he brings us; we must learn to welcome the stranger as he welcomes us, to love as he loves us. As we unite in common mission, the “body of Christ” becomes more than a metaphor. Christ calls us to become a team, to seek God’s will together, to live in peace despite our differences, and to discover the abundance of the gifts God has already given us for being in mission in a sustained way.

But our transformation into a new kind of people does not happen unless we allow it. We can say no and remain unchanged. Or we can say yes and become more like the people Christ needs us to be for the community in which we live. The work of spiritual leadership is to help

the church listen to the call of Christ, open its sails to the wind of the Spirit, and come to terms with the doubts and fears that come with holy adventure. This is the inner work of becoming a disciple-making church and becoming more available to God.

Readings for Reflection

Which readings stir something in you? What insight and challenge you do hear?

“When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, we will be changed from one level of glory to another. The growing fruit of the Holy Spirit in our characters is both transformed and being transformed. It will give evidence of God at work. There will be a fragrance of Christ about our presence. Our deepest attitudes and responses to others will be those of Jesus, because we have learned to let his Spirit grow his life in us. The fruit of Christ’s living in us through the Holy Spirit will be visible signs of “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

—Trevor Hudson, *Holy Spirit Here and Now*

“Every layer of the New Testament testifies that the ministry of the church is conducted by the Holy Spirit . . . Most of us are too busy inventing ministry and fretting over its outcome to realize that the Spirit has been concerned for our people and conducting a ministry among them long before we arrived and will continue to do so long after we

are gone. The name of the game is not thinking up ministry where we are but listening for what the Spirit has in mind.”
—Neill Hamilton, *Maturing in the Christian Life*

“Very likely no one knew the cause of [my missionary father’s] collapse, referred to vaguely as a nervous breakdown. Looking back . . . I can see a cause they never saw; he was doing the work of the Holy Spirit without the full power of the Holy Spirit. . . . The healing of souls and the forgiveness of sins that Our Lord accomplished through my father were real and true. But since the wellspring of God’s power had not been awakened in him, the toll on his own strength was great, and the nerves of his body could not stand it.”
—Agnes Sanford, *Sealed Order*

“Give us grace, O God, to dare to do the deed which we well know cries to be done. Let us not hesitate because of ease, or the words of men’s mouths, or our own lives. Mighty causes are calling us—but they call with voices that mean work and sacrifice and death. Mercifully grant us, O God, the spirit of Esther, that we say: I will go unto the King and if I perish, I perish.”
—W.E.B. Du Bois, early 20th century

Spiritual Exercises

Make time as a group to take up one of the spiritual exercises. Where in your community do you sense the Holy Spirit inviting your church to pay attention and respond?

Read John 20:19-23 (CEB)

“While the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid . . . , Jesus came and stood among them. He said, ‘Peace be with you’ . . . ‘As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.’”

What fears keep you and your church closed off to people in your community? Receive the peace of Christ. When you let go of your fears and open the doors, what possibilities do you see? Whom do you see?

Read Revelation 2:1-7

“I know your works, your toil . . . But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”

Listen for how the Spirit that addressed the angel of seven early churches addresses your church. What is the Spirit saying to the “angel” of your church concerning your spiritual health and fruitfulness? Listen, and write the diagnosis you hear; write the vision you see.

Read Luke 4:16-19

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . . to bring good news to the poor . . . release to the captives . . . recovery of sight to the blind . . . to let the oppressed go free.”

Contemplate your church becoming an open vessel to the Spirit, entirely available, anointed, and sent in the power of Christ’s love. What do you see happening in and through the people? What do you see happening in you?

Read Acts 1:12-14

“All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer. . . .”

Only after many days of constant prayer did the apostles yield entirely to the Spirit of the Lord in the Pentecost story of Acts 2. What barriers do you imagine they needed to work through? What barriers do you and your church need to work through?

Session V

BECOME
PARTNERS WITH
COMPANIONS
ALONG THE WAY

*Spiritual leaders seek partners who listen and respond
together to the leading of the Holy Spirit.*

“I wonder whether you realize a deep great fact?
That souls, all human souls, are interconnected
. . . that we can not only pray for each other but
suffer for each other. Nothing is more real than
this interconnection—this precious power put
by God into the very heart of our infirmities.”

—Friedrich von Hügel, (1852-1925),
spiritual director to Evelyn Underhill

The path to becoming a new kind of people is one we walk together. When we awaken to God’s presence in and among us, we join together in practicing the love of God and neighbor, make ourselves available to God’s “power at work within us to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20), the nature of our

relationships is already being transformed. In the course of giving attention to these movements on the Way, we are becoming partners in discipleship, companions in Christ, members together of Christ's body making God's love visible in the world.

The New Testament witness reminds us at every turn that intentionality about our relationships is key to fulfilling the purpose of the gospel and becoming whole as images of God. We are indeed instrumental to each other's human and spiritual development, means of grace for one another. No one can develop a mature spirituality alone; to be Christian is to be called into Christian community, the crucible of our formation in the fullness of God's love.

Parker Palmer with honesty and humor defines community as that place "where the person you least want to live with always lives. . . . And when that person moves away, someone else arises immediately to take his or her place" ("13 Ways of Looking at Community"). In Christian community, we become partners for helping one another learn to abide in God's love, to love one another as God loves us, to forgive as we are forgiven, to welcome as we've been welcomed, and to face the parts of us that can't do it—at least not yet—on our own. We practice living in the peace we want for the world.

Partnering with one another for growth in Christ's love can take many forms, ranging from congregations to small groups for mutual guidance to spiritual friendships to one-on-one spiritual direction. In the Wesleyan tradition, small "grace groups" and "discipleship groups" provide

the intimate environments of grace and mutual guidance people need to grow in truth and in love. As with the early Methodist class meetings, intentional discipleship groups serve as a “means of the means,” that is, as a means of encouraging our observance of the other means of grace. These groups help us “watch over one another in love,” and provoke love for others. Similarly, weekly Emmaus “fourth day” meetings provide mutual support and guidance for living in grace as Christ-followers. Sharing stories of encountering Christ’s presence and call during the week is followed by accountability for our follow-through on discipleship commitments to daily prayer, study, and action.

Small groups help us practice loving one another as Christ loves us. We commit to attend the meeting not only for ourselves but for one another. On the very weeks we feel we don’t need the group, someone else does; each of us is necessary to offering the space for grace that the group affords.

Beyond being instrumental to one another’s growth in grace, we also partner to bear witness to the kingdom of God in a way that is only possible through shared life. We are learning much today from our African brothers and sisters who believe deeply that a person is only a person as part of a community. Rather than the Western mindset, “I think, therefore I am,” the Africa mindset is more, “I belong, therefore I am.” This points beyond psychology and sociology; it is the way God has made us that reflects the very nature of the triune God in whose image of shared life we are created.

When we become partners in Christ, we not only help each other to grow in grace; we discover for ourselves and begin to make visible the underlying reality of who we are together in God. Evidence in scripture, Christian mystics ancient and contemporary, psychology, and science is deeply impressive that we are not as totally individual or as cut off from each other as it may appear on the surface of things—and as we naively take for granted on a daily basis. Instead it seems highly plausible that our souls are deeply interconnected in the being of God. The hiddenness of this sacred relational reality, our life together in God, is what I believe Paul is referring to when he speaks in Colossians of “our life [together] hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3).

Jesus’ message of the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven is more than a dream of what society could one day become; it was his contemplative vision into the very nature of our shared reality. Beneath the surface of all humanity’s diversity, we are woven together in love, that “Love at the center of all things” (Douglas Steere).

Together in Christ, partnering in formation and mission, we bear witness in the world to what is already true of us in God: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

Readings for Reflection

Which readings stir something in you? What insight and challenge you do hear?

Margaret Benefiel, in her book *The Soul of a Leader*, wisely observes that, “Those who lead with soul seek others who understand that souls need one another in order to flourish.” Admitting this need can be difficult, even counter-cultural. People “speaking the heart’s truth” and “seeking resonance” with another in books, small groups, retreats, and online communities. People ready to walk together toward the kingdom present and becoming.

“In 2 Corinthians 13:13, Paul gives a triune blessing: ‘The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.’ I can almost imagine him saying, ‘I want to get to essentials now, no more nonessentials. What is the most important thing I can say about Jesus? Grace. What is the most important thing I can say about the Father? Love.’

“What’s the most important thing I can say about the Holy Spirit? Power? Tongues? Gifts? No. Fellowship! Yes, fellowship is the deepest work of God’s Spirit. The Spirit of God is drawing us all of the time into a common life with one another. That is the central work of God’s Spirit—creating community.”

—Trevor Hudson, *The Way of Transforming Discipleship*, p. 71

“Two people, three people, ten people may be in living touch with one another through Him who underlies their separate lives. This is an astounding experience, which I can only describe but cannot explain in the language of science.

But in vivid experience of divine Fellowship it is there. We know that these souls are with us, lifting their lives and ours continuously to God and opening themselves, with us, in steady and humble obedience to Him. It is as if the boundaries of our self were enlarged, as if we were within them and as if they were within us. Their strength, given to them by God, becomes our strength, and our joy, given to us by God, becomes their joy. In confidence and love we live together in Him.”

—Thomas Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*, pp. 86-87

“Not all small groups are created equal! Some small groups are better than others. As I have interacted with various approaches to small groups, I would say that there are three main approaches to small groups in contemporary Christianity. First, there are affinity groups. These groups are organized around common passions, interests, or hobbies. . . . Information-driven groups comprise the second type of small groups. These groups are focused on conveying information and are organized by a common curriculum. . . . The third type of small groups are transformation-driven groups. These groups focus not on discussion or mastery of content, but on changed lives, on group members’ experience of God. These small groups are organized around a common desire to support one another in their efforts to become increasingly faithful Christians who are growing in love of God and neighbor.”

—Kevin Watson, *The Class Meeting*, pp. 5-6

Spiritual Exercises

Make time as a group to try one of these spiritual exercises together and then to share in small groups.

Read Luke 24:13-49

“Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them. . . .”

Is it not significant that in this classic story about the risen Christ’s presence to these disillusioned disciples that he becomes known only in the context of spiritual companionship and faith community? Reflect on where this plays out in the story and its significance in each case. For example:

- “two of them” walking to Emmaus (v. 13),
- “when he was at the table with them” (v. 30),
- sharing how “the Lord has . . . appeared” (vv. 34-35)
- being prepared to be “clothed with power . . .” for God’s mission (44-49)

In what ways have you experienced faith community—whether in pairs, groups, family, or congregations—as context for heightened awareness of Christ? What about those settings facilitated your experience of God’s presence? Interrupted your experience of God’s presence?

Read Hebrews 10:24-25

“And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Intentional discipleship groups, like classes and bands in the Wesleyan heritage, have always played a central role in the spiritual formation of God’s people. And still, it is always the case that many “neglect to meet” and fail to ever find partners for provoking love and encouraging one another’s growth in grace.

Who are your partners in discipleship, your companions on the way? How would you describe those relationships and their purpose?

How do you maintain in your church an emphasis on this means of grace and how do you facilitate such partnering?

Read Mark 6:7

“He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority. . . .” Jesus modeled teamwork both in the way he called twelve to form a team for himself and in the way he sent them out two by two, never alone. And yet we continue to go solo.

Reflect on the value of Jesus sending the disciples out two by two. What in your experience is the power of working in partnership? What is the challenge? How do you encourage such partnering in your ministry?

Read 1 John 1:3-4

“We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”

John makes a surprising claim: that the purpose of the gospel is “fellowship.” The Greek word for fellowship here is *koinonia*, meaning “a sharing of life.” What are the qualities of the “fellowship” that John says the gospel creates? When have you experienced the power and authenticity of this type of fellowship?

Note the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of this cross-shaped fellowship. What are the ways you maintain both dimensions?

ABOUT THE UPPER ROOM

The Upper Room is a global ministry dedicated to supporting the spiritual formation of Christians seeking to know and experience God more fully. From its beginnings as a daily devotional guide, Upper Room Ministries has grown to include publications, programs, prayer support, online initiatives, and more to help believers of all ages and denominations move to a deeper level of faith and service.



1908 Grand Avenue • PO Box 340004 •
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