

Spiritual Formation in Church Planting

By Dr. Gailyn Van Rheenen

Christianity in North America is in free-fall, and people wonder why.

David Olson of the American Church Research Project states that in 1990 only 20.4 per cent of the population attended church on any given weekend. In 2000 the percentage had dropped to 18.7 percent and in 2005 to 17.5 percent.¹ A recent *Christian Chronicle* article, entitled “Population outpaces church,” states that the population of the United States has increased 32.2 percent since 1980 (from 226,545,805 to 299,398,484), but Churches of Christ have only grown by 1.6 percent (from 1,245,540 to 1,265,844).² An estimated 45 per cent of Church of Christ young people will abandon the church when they leave home for college or work.³

A few years ago I preached in a large Bible church in Southern California. Over 3,500 people attended three services. The church met in a beautiful building. Their music was professional and inspirational. Their staff was well-trained and professional. Their leaders, however, were running scared. One confessed, “I am not sure if I like what we have created. Only 75 per cent of our people attend only a weekend service. Our church is very fragile: Our families are fragmenting, our young people as immoral, and members medicate their problems. *Christianity is not making a significant difference in our lives.*”

The decline in Christian influence is due to many reasons. Christianity is segmented from life, embedded in rationalistic rather than spiritual frameworks, and seen by postmoderns as a power employed by religious leaders to force them to follow political, social, and religious agendas.

The decline also stems from how pragmatic North Americans define *Christian*. A Christian is seen merely as an attendee at a church which provides them with religious goods and services. These churches develop activities and hire staff that will *attract* and *involve*. Church then becomes a fraternity which one joins to have religious and social needs met - or leave if they are not.

Christ, however, has called us to “make disciples” (Matt. 28:19) who “are being transformed into [God’s] likeness” (2 Cor. 3:18) within a spiritually vibrant community (1 Pet. 2:4-5). The expectation of growing to spiritual maturity is inherent. We should no longer be “infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching. . . . Instead, speaking the truth in love, we . . . grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ” (Eph. 4:14-15). *The Apostolic Tradition*, written by Hippolytus around A.D. 215, defined this process in the early Christian church as having four stages: The *seeker* phase was “a time of Christian inquiry,” the *hearer* period “a time of instruction,” the *kneeler* stage “an intense spiritual preparation for baptism,” and the *faithful* period “a time after baptism for incorporating the new Christian into the full life of the church.”⁴ Today many call themselves Christians without actively seeking, hearing, and kneeling. The result is nominal churches, which have “a form of godliness” but deny its transformative power (2 Tim. 3:5).

Ancient practices of spiritual formation have been largely lost in contemporary culture. Therefore, *Mission Alive*'s community of church planters continually envision and develop, with God's creative imagination, contemporary practices of spiritual formation. Two of these are discussed in this *Mission Alive* Update: Renewal Retreats and Formations Groups.

Renewal Retreats

Even after sinners turn to God, many entrenched habits and addictions remain. Renewal retreats give encouragement and opportunity for all Christians to purify their lives so that they stand before God as holy people. Those who attend expect transformation and renewal, like when Jacob was asked to return to Bethel with his family to "get rid of foreign gods" and "purify [themselves]" (Gen. 35:2). I have personally experienced how God not only leads us to repent of overt sins but also peels back the layers of consciousness to reveal concealed sins festering just below the surface.

One of the most important lessons learned in the retreats is the ability to both *receive* and *give* ministry. We *receive* ministry by submitting to God, identifying areas of Satan's control, and confessing our sins. We *give* ministry by affirming God's forgiveness, renouncing the flesh, the world, and the Devil (James 4:1-10), and speaking blessings into others' lives. This pattern of ministry slowly becomes a part of community life as they understand that our God brings healing to broken lives as they submit to Him. The retreats typically begin on Friday evening and continue through Saturday afternoon.

The themes of these retreats vary. Rob Knight of the Farmers Branch church in Dallas, who has helped us prototype these retreats, uses the title "Prepare for the Battle," emphasizing the spiritual warfare passage of Ephesians 6:10-20. Higher Point in Denver employs the theme "More than Conquerors." Christ Journey in SW Fort Worth/Burleson utilizes the metaphor of Light/Darkness and calls their retreat "Marvelous Light." Northern Hills in Atlanta uses "Walk to Emmaus" (a retreat which transformed my spirit and touched my heart as a participant last month) and are developing their congregational retreat called "Clear View from Bethsaida."

Charles Kiser describes the Marvelous Light retreat at Christ Journey:

The power of the retreat is located in three venues: teaching, testimony, and triad. Teaching segments lay a scriptural foundation and help to create a biblical worldview about the reality of sin and grace. Testimony serves to give a concrete picture of the life of someone who has left the darkness for life in God's light. One woman offered a testimony about her journey to forgiving her parents for years of physical and sexual abuse. One man testified to the darkness he experienced as the high priest of a witch coven and the path he took out of the occult and into the light of God's kingdom. Another man shared his liberation from a legalistic religious mentality. Yet another person shared his recovery from sexual addiction. The final venue, triad, represents the heart of the retreat: gender-based groups of three that join together for the purpose of confession, repentance and the reception of grace. Imagine the impact of confessing your darkest sin and having a brother or sister-in-Christ look you in the eyes and say

with confidence, “Your sins are forgiven.” I was privileged to witness God’s work of transformation firsthand. You can see why this was one of the best ministry experiences of my young life.⁵

Heidi Chappotin of Christ Journey testifies, “We had a retreat at Christ Journey called Marvelous Light...and, man, was it ever marvelous....I have told many people that I had the most amazing encounter with God this weekend that I have ever had in my entire life...I have never truly walked in His grace and light like I have since the retreat. Some things that were strongholds in my life were revealed this weekend and I feel set FREE!!!”

Tears come to my eyes when I hear of the life transformations that take place in these renewal retreats. I have experienced these transformations myself. For us, these retreats have been significant transition points. We have confronted the demonic within our souls and turned more fully to God, who graciously grants forgiveness and fullness.

These retreats illustrate the journey of God’s communities as they help each other become authentic disciples.

Formation Groups

Those coming into our new churches frequently trust more in their own expertise than the sovereignty of God. They know little about the Bible and thus seldom use it as a resource for living. Like many nominal Christians, their families are fragmenting, their young people are immoral, and they medicate their problems. To become Christ’s disciples, a paradigm shift must occur – a turning from secular self-sufficiency to reliance on God.

These searchers are encouraged to come into one of the House Churches within the larger church. This small community helps them and their family on the journey to spiritual maturity. Participants in each House Church live in the same or adjoining neighborhoods so that they can connect not only on weekends but also throughout the week. They learn to eat, play, and share life together. Their children attend the same schools and play on the same soccer or baseball teams. Thus participants minister together in the context of the broader community.

Within the house churches Formation Groups are formed. These gender-specific groups of 3-4 people meet weekly for an hour and a half of intensive study of Scripture, concentrated prayer, and mutual accountability. Participants covenant to meet for five months to help each other grow to Christian maturity. Formation Groups are non-manipulative, non-hierarchical, community-oriented – a place where God uses others to speak into our lives.

Significant transformation takes place in these Formation Groups. One man, for example, shared that he became a Christian so that he could be a good husband and father. The result, he confessed, was that he became a good Christian in the evenings and on weekends but left his “Christian self at home” when he went to work. He believed that “God was relevant to Family and Community life but . . . not to our modern day work place.” The prayers, scriptural applications, and accountability of the Formation Group helped him bring Christ

into *all* areas of his life. God guided him in dealing with an unpleasant employee, pulling out of an impossible contract, and negotiating graciously with notoriously obnoxious leaders of a major company. He testifies that his Formation Group helped him to understand that . . .

Jesus' teachings apply to the workplace as much if not more than anywhere else. Ultimately, we are dealing with other people whether they are customers, vendors, or employees. While at work, He expects us to take up the cross daily and to have a servant attitude when working with these people. We deny ourselves when we go the extra mile to help a co-worker complete his task to save them from having to stay late. We deny ourselves when we give a vendor a second chance after a late delivery or quality problem. We deny ourselves when we turn negotiations over to God and allow him to work through us.⁶

Basic understandings about Formation Groups can be found in Greg Ogden's *Transforming Discipleship*.⁷ His *Discipleship Essentials*⁸, used by many of our church planters, is one practical guide for nurturing of Christians to maturity. Eventually we will develop our own guide for Formation Groups, which provides a broader historical framework through which the principles of Christianity can be understood. We feel that the flow of scripture, i.e., the biblical narrative, should shape our story as Christ's disciples.

In addition to equipping Christians to follow the way of Christ, Formation Groups equip leaders as Jesus taught Peter, James, and John. Many who are discipled in a Formation Group and have begun another are spiritually prepared to lead a House Church.

Renewal Retreats and Formation Groups are two significant forums that we have found for equipping God's people to grow to maturity in Christ.

¹ David T. Olson, The State of the American Church, Power Point Slide #19. www.TheAmericanChurch.org, 2006.

² Erik Tryggestad, Population outpaces church. *The Christian Chronicle* 64 (February 2007): 1.

³ Erik Tryggestad, Are we losing our young people. *The Christian Chronicle* 64 (July 2007): 8.

⁴ Robert E. Webber, Robert E. *Journey to Jesus*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), p. 11.

⁵ Charles Kiser, Apprenticeship Update. May 22, 2007.

⁶ Anonymous Testimony, Christ Journey Church.

⁷ Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 117-198.

⁸ Greg Ogden, *Disciple Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998).