



## **Spiritual Formation for Ministry on the Fringe**

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The Greek word ἐκκλησία (ek-lay-see'-uh) means “called-on gathering or assembly”, and is the word most often translated “church” in our English Bible. If the church is called, then it is reasonable to expect that its leaders live a life worthy of that calling (Ephesians 4:1). A key, and often overlooked, aspect of this worthy goal is the cultivation of the inner life, or spiritual formation. This is no less true for those ministering to people living on society’s fringe. In fact, a healthy spirituality is vital to our ability to maintain a missional outlook, and avoid burnout. Our ministries of reconciliation and advocacy for the marginalized must be grounded in a life of prayer and practice.

Let us pray.

*Father, we acknowledge that we have only washed the outside of the cup. In our desire to be thought well of, we have focused on externals and behavior modification while denying You our very hearts. We have chased ideological rabbits instead of sitting down to the spiritual feast You’ve spread out for us. Forgive us.*

*Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.*

*Amen.*

The primary focus of the process of spiritual formation cannot be anything other than connecting our hearts to the heart of Jesus Christ. Increased knowledge, sharpened vision, and theological insight are all good things, and indeed these may be experienced as by-products of the contemplative life, but they must never be our primary goals in times of intentional spiritual formation.

As a framework for the spiritual formation of ministers, counselors, youth workers, and all who are concerned with serving people on the fringe, this document exists to provide guidance and encouragement rather than a set of ironclad requirements. These recommendations are offered in complete humility, and with the hope that this manual remains an interactive document. Six practices (prayer, reading, fasting, solitude, authentic community, and spiritual direction) will form the core of this approach to a practical, mystical, daily spirituality. To unpack:

**Practical** – These practices will be challenging, especially in our hurried, harried modern lives. However, these are realistically flexible and applicable, bearing in mind the demands of family, work, church, etc.

**Mystical** – The idea here is simply that the cerebral, deductive side of faith is de-emphasized in this approach; in favor of the intuitive, imaginative, and emotional responses that tend to be repressed in some of the most dominant forms of modern Christian spirituality. Christianity has been traditionally understood as a mystical faith for the majority of its existence, and in our practice we should seek to reclaim that historical position.

**Daily** – In order for the contemplative life to be a successful tool in spiritual formation, it must be practiced on a daily basis. Now, this doesn't mean that all six elements have to be covered each and every day; on the contrary, they will lose their power if they simply become items on a checklist. Instead, our focus should be on practicing at least one each day (and if only one can be practiced on a certain day, it should probably be prayer). We also should look for ways to creatively integrate more than one element in a single activity (in the case of *lectio divina*, this synergy is a built-in feature; see section on prayer below).

## Prayer

Prayer is an avenue between the Creator and the created, and is the means through which our most intimate connections with divinity occur. An abundant prayer life should be a goal for every Christ-follower, but we as leaders in particular should be marked as people of prayer. Keeping that in mind, we should strive for the following characteristics:

**Simplicity – *Lord, we have the tendency to pontificate like a Pharisee or babble on like a pagan when we pray. Give us a desire to be without pretension when we enter Your presence. In times of contemplation, we may experience extended seasons of prayer, but help us resist the temptation to fill times of silence with meaningless talk.***

**Honesty – *God, sometimes You are really hard to get. May we be honest about the day's struggles, our own doubts, and our frustration with the way things are. Give us the heart of David and Jesus on the cross, where we have the guts to say, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"***

**Intercession – *Jesus, we know it breaks your heart when we become so self-centered that we ignore the plights of our brothers and sisters; broken humanity all around us. The prophet Samuel doesn't mince words when he calls it sin to fail to pray for others. Lord, help us to really consider everyone else better than ourselves when we pray, and may our intercessions reflect that.***

**Listening – *Lord, sometimes no words are needed at all. Remind us that you often speak in a whisper, and if we're to hear what You're saying, we need to learn to just shut up sometimes.***

**Creativity – *Father, prayer only becomes trite and ritualistic if we let it. Help us to draw on the wisdom of those who've run the race before us, as well as being on the lookout for new expressions of prayer all around us, so that our communication with You remains fresh.***

There are some basic practices of the ancient church which can help focus our creativity in prayer. These include:

### **Prayer of Examen**

Attributed to St. Ignatius of Loyola, the *Examen* serves to help the practitioner prayerfully evaluate the day. Therefore, it is best prayed at night. As laid out by Phyllis Zagano in the article "Finding God in All Things", the *Examen* breaks down as follows:

1. First, prepare for the season of prayer. This means different things to different people, but it basically means to do something that distinguishes this sacred time from the prevailing rhythm of the rest of the day. It may mean lighting candles,

- burning incense, softly singing a song of praise, reciting memorized scripture, or even simply pacing the room a few times before settling into a comfortable prayer posture.
2. As noted above, find a comfortable posture for prayer. This is usually accomplished by just sitting in a favorite chair with your back straight and head held at a neutral angle, but feel free to experiment with lying down or kneeling if you wish.
  3. The first stage of prayer involves our awareness of entering God's presence. We ask the Holy Spirit to intercede when words fail us, and to help us look back on our day with love and gratitude.
  4. Next, we take inventory of the blessings God has granted today. We must remember that each moment is a gift from our loving Father, and with this perspective, even small details reveal themselves as abundant blessings from God's hand.
  5. Now, we begin to review the day in more detail, meditating on these questions in particular:
    - *When did I fail?* Be honest and thorough, but don't spend too much time here.
    - *When did I love?* Perfect freedom is found in love, and vice versa.
    - *Am I developing any negative habits or life rhythms?* Discover where your day needed to submit to the holy rhythm of Christ's love.
    - *In what unexpected places or ways did I experience God's grace today?*
  6. The last step is reconciliation with Jesus Himself. This requires some creative concentration, as the idea is to speak directly to Jesus as if He were in the room, sharing a conversation. The idea is to be truly sorry for our shortcomings, but more importantly to experience the love, grace, and acceptance of Christ being injected into our lives. The *Examen* begins and ends with grace.
  7. As an optional closing, you may want to recite a common prayer (The Lord's Prayer, The Jesus Prayer, the Gloria Patri<sup>1</sup> and/or the Doxology, etc.) before continuing with your evening.

## **The Book of Common Prayer**

This collection of Anglican devotional and liturgical prayers has helped add structure and creativity to the spiritual lives of many journeyers over the centuries. New editions are available at any good bookstore, and used copies are everywhere online. For contemporary language, use the official prayer book of The Episcopal Church or the

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<sup>1</sup> "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever, world without end. Amen."

highly creative Anglican Church of New Zealand prayer book. For traditional language, see the official prayer book for the Church of England.

### **The Jesus Prayer**

*Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. – 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18*

Paul's desire is for Christian disciples to be in a constant spirit of prayer. We can do this by asking for the Holy Spirit to keep us aware of its presence throughout the day and/or through the beautiful biblical simplicity of the Jesus Prayer.

*Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"*

*Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"*

*Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.*

*"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him.*

*The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see."*

*"Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road. – Mark 10:46-52*

We can glean a simple, quick and vital prayer from Bartimaeus' encounter with Jesus. This prayer has been part of the Eastern Orthodox tradition for centuries, and can be offered up several times during the day to acknowledge our brokenness and Christ's prevalent grace as the indwelling Spirit prompts us. There are a handful of variations, but the traditional form is as follows:

"Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Amazing peace can be attained just by uttering that one sentence. It completely clarifies our relationship with God, and instantly prepares us for further prayer, if necessary. When recited continuously, it can help us enter a deeper meditative state, where mystical interaction with God can be facilitated. To accomplish this, try timing the prayer with your natural breathing patterns, inhaling on "Lord Jesus Christ," and exhaling with "have mercy on me."

### ***Lectio Divina***

In the ancient practice of *lectio divina*, the spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, and Scripture reading are combined in a powerful, virtually seamless way.

### *Step 1 – Lectio (reading)*

This first step assumes the regular reading of Scripture. We may be reading through the entire Bible in a one- or two-year plan, praying the Psalms, or following a cycle of the lectionary, but the assumption is that we are indeed somehow intentionally feeding ourselves (studying and interpreting and applying Scripture) on a regular basis.

### *Step 2 – Meditatio (meditation)*

In this step, we choose a passage (preferably a sentence, paragraph, or other complete unit of thought) from the day's reading and meditate on it. We ruminate on it, memorize it, and repeat it to ourselves; concentrating on allowing it to seep into our consciousness and truly hiding His Word in our hearts (Psalm 119).

### *Step 3 – Oratorio (prayer)*

The idea here is to pray for consecration, that is, to offer ourselves (even those parts which are unlovable) anew to God in light of the word He's shared with us through meditation. As we pray, we allow ourselves to enter the text, to experience it as if it were the first time (even though we've already memorized it). We allow the Word of grace to penetrate us, effectively demolishing the various defense mechanisms that protect the deepest parts of our hearts. We respond to this grace with gratitude, and enter into a time of silence.

### *Step 4 – Contemplatio (contemplation)*

We finish by resting in the presence of God. Silent and listening, we let Him speak to us if He wishes. We realize that, like in any healthy relationship, sometimes words are completely unnecessary. Letting God's grace transform us through His Word is a vital choice; resting in His arms afterward the only response.

It is important to realize that *lectio divina*, as well as the other practices covered here, involves an intentional disruption in our daily rhythm with the intent of discovering the spiritual rhythm God longs for us to live by. As Fr. Luke Dysinger says in his article "Accepting the Embrace of God":

If we are to practice *lectio divina* effectively, we must travel back in time to an understanding that today is in danger of being almost completely lost. In the Christian past the words *action* (or *practice*, from the Greek *praktikos*) and *contemplation* did not describe different kinds of Christians engaging (or not engaging) in different forms of prayer and apostolates. Practice and contemplation were understood as the two poles of our underlying, ongoing spiritual rhythm: a gentle oscillation back and forth between spiritual "activity" with regard to God and "receptivity".

## Sacred Reading

It is clear that the vast majority of the apostles and early church fathers were literate, well-read men; which was no small thing in pre-Enlightenment times. It is equally clear that these leaders viewed reading as an important act of worship. Living as we do in the “Information Age”, there is no excuse for our generation to be poor readers. Reading for spiritual formation is different by design; however, than any other kind of reading we do; whether for pleasure or education. When we read devotionally, we actively engage the text (inspired or otherwise) and let God transform our minds through the power of human language. Spiritually motivated reading should be an immersive experience, bookended by prayer and imbued with the presence of the Holy Spirit.

### **Scripture**

God’s Word should of course be the cornerstone of any Christ-follower’s reading. There are countless methods, plans, and strategies intended to develop a consistent “devotional time”; these don’t need to be examined here. What is important is regular, prayerful, contextual, contemplative reading of the Bible.

See the above section on *lectio divina* for more discussion on Scripture reading.

### **Other Works**

The wisdom of fellow travelers is indispensable in our own spiritual journey. In the modern church, this insight has been embraced and has led to an explosion in Christian publishing. While there is *some* good fruit to be found in the current crop of evangelical bestsellers, today’s disciples are learning less and less about the spiritual classics from years, decades, and even centuries past.

These classics are devotional works that express the author’s spirituality and often document their own spiritual journey, directly or indirectly. They may take the form of a biography or autobiography, a collection of letters, theological treatise, pointed spiritual instruction, fiction and/or allegory, or simply entries from a journal.

As a starting point, here are a few contemporary (and some classic) devotional works to help you get started.

*The Cloud of Unknowing* by Anonymous

*Way of a Pilgrim* by Anonymous (for more on The Jesus Prayer, see *Franny and Zooey* by JD Salinger)

*The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence

*Leaving Church* by Barbara Brown-Taylor

*The Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan

*My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers

*Orthodoxy* by GK Chesterton

*Holy the Firm* by Annie Dillard



*Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek* by Annie Dillard  
*The Dream of God* by Verna Dozier  
*Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster  
*Mariette in Ecstasy* by Ron Hansen (mature readers only)  
*Revelations of Divine Love* by Julian of Norwich  
*The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis  
*Plan B* by Anne Lamott  
*Traveling Mercies* by Anne Lamott  
*The Great Divorce* by CS Lewis  
*A Grief Observed* by CS Lewis  
*Mere Christianity* by CS Lewis  
*Till We Have Faces* by CS Lewis (mature readers only)  
*Take This Bread* by Sara Miles  
*Blue Like Jazz* by Donald Miller  
*Searching For God Knows What* by Donald Miller  
*In The Name of Jesus* by Henri Nouwen  
*The Wounded Healer* by Henri Nouwen  
*A Long Obedience* by Eugene Peterson  
*Letters to My Students* by Charles Haddon Spurgeon  
*The Divine Conspiracy* by Dallas Willard  
*Descent into Hell* by Charles Williams  
*Surprised by Hope* by NT Wright  
*The Shack* by William P Young

## Fasting

Fasting is an integral practice, unfortunately often overlooked in the modern church, which brings us into constant intimacy with our Creator and Redeemer by declaring our utmost reliance on Him. Food is a necessity that has become an indulgence in this land of plenty, and as such has completely distorted our understanding of “Give us this day our daily bread.” Fasting is a spiritual exercise rooted firmly in practicality. Eating our two or three meals a day, plus interval snacking throughout the day, seems like such a mundane activity until we are denied it. Then, our stomachs remind us that something’s lacking, and we are reminded just how limited we really are and exactly how gracious God is even in giving us food to eat. With the distractions of mealtime removed, we can find ourselves spending more time with God than we thought was possible in a day.

Now, it is true that sometimes health or dietary concerns make complete abstinence from food, even for a day, inadvisable. In these cases, fasting may need to be delayed or expressed differently (fasting from an addiction like TV, movies, video games, the Internet, a good pipe, etc.), but fasting from food is what Jesus intended for His disciples.

*When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. – Matthew 6:16-18*

Jesus not only assumes that His followers will fast, but that they will do so privately. This means we resist the temptation to take pride in our fasting, or even to share with other Christians our accomplishments in fasting. This is passive-aggressive pride. It does not mean, however, that we conceal our fasting from *everyone*. As William Law reminds us, fasting can be a powerful witness to our families.

## Solitude and Retreat

Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed, as we learn throughout the Gospels. His days were packed to the gills: long stretches of travel, numerous appointments (expected and unexpected), lunch meetings, speaking engagements, countless friends and associates begging for just a minute of His time. Sound familiar?

The busier life gets, the greater our need to simply back away and seek times and places of silence and solitude. Again, this could be a lifesaver for urban ministers in particular. Solitude, even if it's accomplished simply by designing a prayer closet or other sacred space in our homes, can serve as the incubator in which we see our spiritual life grow. Silence goes hand in hand with solitude, so it is best for our times of solitude to coincide with the quietest times of our day.

Times of silence and solitude can be designated for reading, prayer, and meditation. Some days, however, they might better serve as seasons of simply resting in God's presence, listening for His sweet whisper. The practice of silence can also be taken out of our sacred spaces and into the world. Even in the midst of a busy, demanding day, it's amazing how clear God's voice can be if we choose to speak only when necessary. Fasting from unnecessary speech not only clarifies our relationships with those we come in contact with everyday, it also seeps into our prayer life; helping us to "let our words be few" and stepping ever closer to the simple prayers our Father desires.

Beyond the practices of silence and solitude in our everyday lives, we must also allow for times of extended (a day or more) retreat. This isn't vacation, although it may be possible to incorporate elements of retreat into a vacation. Retreat is complete withdrawal from the world; a chance to "unwire" and not have any other demands hanging over our heads. It usually involves escaping to an area less inhabited, where the glory of God's creation is left relatively unmolested. The location may be a state park or wildlife preserve, a privately owned lake or timber (with permission of course), or possibly a Christian camp or retreat center designed for such a purpose. Spending a day at a monastery, convent, or other Christian commune is another option. Retreats may be individual or corporate, programmed or open; for families, couples, or just the individual; they may be organized around practicing the disciplines, receiving education, or a combination of the two. The important thing is to have some idea going in what's going to happen, and/or praying in advance for a specific outcome.

If more than one are retreating together, a substantial part of time should still be spent in solitude; with allotted time for coming together as a group and practicing communally, worshipping corporately, and eating and fellowshiping together. Retreats are a chance for the spirit to be refreshed, the mind to be nurtured, and the heart to be blessed. Even if they are not often possible, we should intentionally seek out opportunities for retreat whenever we can.

## Authentic Community

Christ's prayer in John 17 that His followers would be one has yet to be realized in this post-Reformation era. This is not to say we should wish for a return to the corrupt, absolute rule of Medieval Catholic Europe, but it is worth noting nonetheless that as time goes on, the Church becomes more and more fractured and marginalized. We long for the unity of the early believers, and while that goal may be far from being realized (if it is ever to be reached at all), there is much that we can do now. In the city, where so many feel lonely and isolated, authentic community can be a way to reach outside of ourselves and connect with others.

Jesus said that the world would know us as His followers by our love for each other. This, therefore, must be a priority of the highest order. We must get down to the business of building Christ-centered, loving friendships with each other; sharing in each other's lives, viewing each other in humility as being co-bearers of God's very image, and bearing each other's burdens.

Bearing each other's burdens in particular is a concept that has become over-spiritualized and too abstract. Reclaiming a more practical understanding is crucial to building authentic community in the Body of Christ. The idea of bearing each other's burdens breaks down like this:

*Acceptance* – We start by accepting each other according to the paradox of life in Christ. That is, we realize that each and every one of us is both totally fallen and totally redeemed. We understand that everyone is at a different stage of their journey with Jesus, but that failure is possible at any step along the way. We make confession and forgiveness freely available to our brothers and sisters.

*Recognition and Confrontation* – We seek to be led by the Holy Spirit in spotting fear or unrepentant sin in our own lives or the lives of others. When the issue at stake is unrepentant sin, Jesus' instructions for graceful confrontation are to be followed. Confrontation can be a messy word, but if we go in a spirit of humility and genuine concern, then more often than not we see mutually agreeable resolution.

*Substitution* – If the issue is paralyzing fear, then we quite literally ask to bear the other's burden, provided it is not a fear that we ourselves are susceptible to. We begin by asking the other to name the fear, or describe it. We then gently remind them that Christ has assured us that there is nothing to fear, for He has overcome the world. Finally, we tell them that their burden is now ours and they shouldn't worry over it anymore. Continuing in prayer for that person, we remain available should they be burdened with fear again.

*Confession and Accountability* – When we have sinned, the immediate temptation is to cover it up. This quickly becomes habit, and leads to unrepentant sin. However, if we are quick to confess a sin, it is quick to lose its hold on us. In addition, if we assume the responsibility of being held accountable, then true repentance becomes more likely. It is important to note that in authentic community, responsibility lies with the one seeking to

be held accountable. If we ourselves do not desire repentance, no amount of “accountability partners” will hold us to it. It’s fairly easy to lie if we simply wish to avoid disapproval.

It is in the area of burden-bearing that the most improvement is needed, if authentic community is to be complete. However, we must not neglect the other aspects of life together in Christian community; fellowship, celebration, edification, providing for each other’s needs, and charity to those outside Christ, to name a few. Let’s not forget that when true discipleship is happening in our midst, then we will see Christ’s mission to seek and save the lost happening in the world around us.

## Spiritual Direction

Spiritual direction, or mentoring, should ideally be the framework in which the other disciplines we've discussed are practiced. Not only that, but a thriving mentor culture is key for any church looking to model the "life together" discipleship of Acts 2. Christian growth does not happen in a vacuum. The thing is, mentoring relationships must be intentionally sought out. They very rarely just happen without effort.

### A framework for spiritual direction and one-on-one discipleship

- It is best for all mature believers to be mentoring a younger Christian, as well as being mentored by someone farther along in their journey.
- At the very least, everyone should have a peer mentor.
- It is vital for leaders to be mentoring.
- It is equally vital that all new believers be mentored.

At this point, we need to lean on the other disciplines we've learned. It is my opinion that we cannot just mentor (or be mentored by) anyone. Therefore, this should be a matter of much prayer (and possibly fasting). Some questions we may want to consider as we choose those we enter into mentoring relationships:

- What kind of relationship (teacher/student, confessional/accountability, open discussion, social, service-oriented) am I looking for? Most mentoring relationships will contain elements of all of the above, but one usually dominates.
- Do I want our discussion to center on one particular topic? Possible topics include theology/doctrine, ministry/service, spiritual formation, favorite authors/books, music, film, hobbies, art, etc. (or any combination thereof)
- What do I hope to gain from this connection? What do I hope the other person receives from me?
- Who do I feel an affinity for?
- Has God been putting certain people on my heart?

## Conclusion

As this handbook comes to a close, I'd like to do so with a challenge to practice the disciplines we've discussed. Making spiritual direction a priority is especially important. Please make this a priority in prayer. If you're already in a mentoring relationship, continue. If you are not currently being mentored or mentoring someone else, please pray about opportunities to do just that. Even though most of the disciplines we've discussed are individual in nature, they are best practiced in the context of intentional spiritual direction.

If possible, consider enlisting the services of a licensed spiritual director. A web search of such licensed professionals in your area is a good place to begin looking. Also, ask your pastor or local denominational authorities for a referral.

And now, for the glory of God and in the service of Jesus the Christ, may those of us who choose to wrestle with the contemplative life hold to the Word and to each other as we learn to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God...

Amen.