

Reaching Out to Others Transforms Us

Ministry to others is especially important to our spiritual growth. "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Ephesians 2:10). Jesus says in Matthew 25:31-46 that we are saved when we visit the sick or the imprisoned, provide food, drink or clothing to those in need, or welcome a stranger. As we share God's love with other people, we ourselves also experience and are transformed by that love.

In a recent church survey developed by Eric Swanson for the Leadership Network, 92% of the people responded that ministry to others enhanced their spiritual growth; not one person felt that it hindered their growth. 63% said ministering to others was at least as important to them as other spiritual disciplines such as prayer and Bible study, and 24% said serving others was more important in their spiritual development than other spiritual disciplines. 88% of the people who were ministering to others were satisfied with their spiritual growth, while 58% of the people who were not involved in ministry to others were less satisfied with their level of spiritual growth. (To take this short survey, go to <http://www.zoomerang.com/survey.zgi?VG097K16JP78LP1KHF4L0NGT.>)

A passionate and growing Christian needs a ministry to others. One of the wonders of our faith is that we discover even greater spiritual gifts by using our gifts (I Corinthians 14:12). Our faith does not just grow by what we think or believe but by what we do and experience. We become Christians by loving and serving others. By serving Jesus, we also come to see and know Jesus.

This tells us something important about our mission as congregations: if we want to help people become stronger Christians, we need to get individuals in our church community involved in serving others. Any service to others may lead to spiritual growth – whether it is preaching the gospel, forming others or serving on a particular ministry team; or it is binding up the broken hearted and comforting those who mourn (Isaiah 61:1, 2); or it is sharing food with the hungry or providing the poor wanderer with shelter (Isaiah 58:7); or it is being "merciful as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

The keys for God's love to transform us are personal involvement and actually serving other people. The particular ministry that we are passionate about will depend on God's particular call to us based on where we are on our own spiritual journey. Mother Theresa reminded us "there are no great deeds, only small deeds done with great love." We each need to ask ourselves how we are intended to be instruments of God's love in the world.

The same is true of our church communities. There is no single way for a church to serve God. We need to be aware of our unique context and personality and recognize that God has a particular call for us; part of God's call is leaving up to us the possibilities of choosing what we are gifted at or enjoy doing. Christian ministry is obviously neither just for the clergy nor just giving money; it cannot just be left to the outreach committee. And churches who use

outreach to balance their budget or who cut back on outreach to focus on other activities will slow their spiritual growth and become less passionate.

Many of our churches are involved in helping others with pastoral care ministries or community outreach ministries. Some churches are developing specific ministries on their own to meet identified local needs, such as shoe sheds, shelters or food pantries. Other churches are partnering with other agencies to meet the needs of the larger community. Individuals in these churches, and the church communities themselves, are discovering where they are invited to serve and are being transformed by these experiences. They are experiencing what it means to be part of the body of Christ and to grow more and more into that body (Ephesians 4).