

Spending Time With God

One of the eight qualities of healthy congregations described by Christian A. Schwarz in *Natural Church Development* is both the object and the foundation of each of the other qualities of healthy congregations: *passionate spirituality*. Members of healthy churches live out their faith with joy, commitment, fire and enthusiasm. These people learn to live their faith with “contagious enthusiasm” and to share it with others.

Spiritual passion and energy comes from nurturing ever-closer relationships with God. People in healthy congregations understand that they are on a spiritual path and take time to focus on their personal and communal relationships with God. They concentrate on being more aware of the presence of God in their lives and on making their lives more responsive to God. Schwarz writes, “passionate spirituality demonstrates empirically the theological core of the matter in church growth: the life of faith as a genuine *relationship* with Jesus Christ.”

Passionate spirituality begins with awareness that God is a person who loves us and wants to have a personal relationship with us. For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son (John 3:16). Jesus is not just a sacrifice for us. His resurrection means that Jesus lives now! Jesus is with us day by day (Matthew 28:20) and “is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25). This is why we invite people to come and see and come to know Jesus. If we accept Jesus into our lives, Jesus comes to be present with us today and helps us to have closer relationships with God and one another.

As Jesus often pointed out, the walk of faith is more than “doing one’s duty,” belonging to a particular group, performing a certain rule or ceremony, or following a particular rule, doctrine or moral code. Passionate spirituality requires an ongoing personal relationship with God.

God is always with us but we do not always act as if we are in relationship with God. We are often distracted from God by the day-to-day activities of our lives. As in any personal relationship, we need to spend time together for the relationship to grow. We are tempted to think we will meet God in the future, but we need to make God a part of our lives right now. If we are to live in relationship with God, we need to spend time with God.

We embark on a spiritual path by acknowledging the need we have for God in our lives and acting from that awareness toward a stronger relationship with God. With a longing to know God better and to see God’s grace more fully established in our lives, we can ask God to be with us (Matthew 7:7-8). God causes our spiritual growth; but we may plant, feed and water (I Corinthians 3:6) by practicing spiritual disciplines. Examples of spiritual disciplines are confession, discernment, faith sharing, fasting, journaling, meditation, prayer, service, stewardship, study and worship. Other spiritual disciplines are described in the rules of various religious orders (i.e., the orders of St. Benedict, St. Ignatius and St. John the

Evangelist). Spiritual disciplines may be practiced individually, with a spiritual guide, in families or small groups, or corporately.

Each individual and group will find different disciplines helpful for spiritual renewal at different times. None of the tools that help make us aware of God's presence provide ultimate answers for us. The fundamental importance of any discipline is spending time with God.

A spiritual life is a life of choosing to be aware of God's presence and, from that awareness, of beginning to manifest God's presence in the world. We each need to listen for activities that might personally help us to spend time with God, and decide whether we feel called to add some of these activities to our lives to strengthen our relationships with God. At the same time, perhaps we can shed some attitudes or activities that keep us out of relationship with God. The result of our own more passionate spirituality will be a healthier church.