

evangelicalism

Building
Missionary
Congregations

Yes, but how?
Number 9

Renewing the
Church Around
Spirituality

Practical Ideas for Action

Part Four - Expressing Spirituality
in the Life of the Church

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The great problem with the word 'spirituality' is its vagueness. Though it may be a 'catch-all' term, the problem is that the grid of its meaning is so wide that everything in the final issue falls through. For this reason, having (in previous articles) considered some of the aspects of its meaning when used in a wider sense, this article turns to consider it when we tighten the mesh of its meaning. The aim is not to squeeze the life out of the concept, but rather to get hold of it so that it can become something we can commend to people as workable.

Rule of life as starting point

One particular way of focusing the meaning of the term is to develop a rule of life for a church or group. Many 'spirituality' groups do just this - such as the Third Order of Franciscans, Focolare and Cursillo. By doing so people have a framework in which to engage with a particular spirituality, and a means of relating it to their everyday experience of life.

In the normal Anglican parish context this cannot be imposed. However, it can be discussed, explored, developed together and made available without being required for church membership. One way that this has been done is for home groups in a church all to be developed along the lines of one particular spirituality. One such church does not have 'home groups', just 'Cursillo groups'. Another way is for the church to develop its own 'rule of life' itself. It certainly is more likely to be in harmony with the members, and they are more likely to want to explore it, if they have been involved in its development.

A good case can be made out for talking in terms of a 'way of life' rather than a 'rule of life'.

In a culture where personal control is a major aspiration, 'rules' are not seen as life-giving. Moreover, the use of the idea of a 'way of life' fits well with the contemporary understanding of the Christian faith as a journey. It also makes the sense of progress and discovery more

evident. It avoids any unhealthy sense of having 'arrived' ("we 'did' prayer in 1985"!).

Valuable though a 'way of life' can be, it is not the only way, nor is it likely to be sufficient on its own. The key to the promotion and development of an effective spirituality in a church is its application and expression in the whole life of the church. Every aspect of the church's life can, and indeed needs to be, harnessed to express the church's spirituality.

The Spiritual Journey

Let us take one example and see how it might work out. The example is taken from Gustavo Gutierrez' book *We Drink From Our Own Wells* (subtitled 'The Spiritual Journey of a People': SCM '83). Four elements, or characteristics, of such a spiritual journey (or 'way'). Four elements he writes about (he included others, but these are sufficient for the purpose of illustration) are:

- *Encounter with the Lord* - the living heart of the knowledge of God.
- *Walking in the Spirit* - making choices guided by our Christian Value-system.
- *Conversion* - a whole way of life based on solidarity with the poor.
- *Joy* - letting Easter shine through all our struggles and suffering.

How might a church, committed to such a spirituality (or spiritual journey) express these elements? Here are some suggestions, simply identified as areas for exploration and consideration.

Sunday services

To see worship as about encounter with God will give a spiritual goal and focus both to preparation and to the conduct of such worship. The leader will be looking for particular moments of 'encounter' that may arise, and is likely to give some pointers in introducing readings and songs/hymns (whilst avoiding wordiness or invariable introductions), as well as awareness of moments of stillness - for example after the reading of scripture, after preaching, during intercessions and at the moment of reception of the sacrament.

Sermons

The text will be handled in such a way as most likely to elicit an encounter with God, which may well move the church in the direction of making choices in handling life (walking in the Spirit and conversion) and in response to difficulties (joy). Great Bible stories such as David and Goliath and the Exodus and Exile are likely to play a prominent part in such preaching.

Intercessions

Prayers will focus particularly on the pain and struggles of the church, and of the poor, and are likely to be allowed to be led by laity in such a way that something of the passion, and compassion of Christ, is expressed with the emotions, not just the mind. Conversion, as the continual turning of life to care for the creation and for those who suffer will shape the agenda for prayer.

Agendas

Important matters of fabric and finance need to be dealt with thoroughly. Yet even in groups responsible for handling them, including PCCs, the larger agenda of the church needs to be allowed to surface. On the PCC this may well mean that time is allotted in such a way that issues relating to encounter, walking in the Spirit, conversion and joy, figure at least as prominently as fabric, finance and social programmes. On Fabric and Finance committees, the use of buildings and money to further the ends of the church such as 'solidarity with the poor', need to be regularly built in - however pressing the 'immediate' is. Remember,

'The urgent things are rarely important, and the important things are rarely urgent'.

Social Agendas

If joy is one of the keynotes of the spiritual life of the church then not only will social events be an important expression of that life, but the way that they are run will be given careful consideration to ensure that real *celebration* (which avoids competition about who bakes the best cakes!), and true *welcome* (rather than a 'closed shop' mentality) will need to be measured at least as carefully as toting up how much the

'bring-and-buy stall takes. Such events will need also to be built around moments appropriate to the spirituality of the church: e.g. celebrating the opening of a homelessness shelter, or the winning of an asylum case which the church has been 'in solidarity with'.

Here it is also important to point out that many churches have good bridges into the community (caring activities to the surrounding world), yet little traffic into church membership. This may well be due to the fact that the spirituality of the church rarely surfaces through such bridge actions. Yet if the good news of Jesus Christ has no discernable effect on our attitude to people and/or our values, style, and manner of working with others, we have to ask what it is about.

Helping the spirituality of the church to spill out, in natural and unforced ways, is an important aspect of the development of the church.

Pastoral Work

The church, including, perhaps particularly, the clergy, so often know much more easily how to exercise pastoral care for the needy than for the healthy. Yet the healthy often form a majority, or certainly key element, in the life of the church. They too need pastoral care. That care needs to be given not just when they fall ill, or out of work, but when they are well. Such care will be focused on helping them to be 'holy', not just comfortable. As such there will be an element of affirming support/challenge in discovering what steps they are taking in encounter with the Lord, walking in the Spirit, and living in conversion and joy. It is likely to include help with personal prayer that leads to such encounter, walking, conversion and joy.

Study

It is unlikely that progress will be made, or skill developed in the outworking of a church's spirituality, without careful attention to the subject over a sustained period. A steady diet of reading, and willingness to find experts, facilitators and spiritual guides, is likely to be a vital part of the work of such leadership.

The words of the 1662 ordination service strike a challenging note here when the ordinand is asked 'will you draw all your studies this way?' Sustained theological, pastoral, and practical engagement with the subject is required.

Quality is never an accident. It is always the result of intelligent effort. There must be a will to produce a superior thing.' (Anonymous)

Church Culture

All that has been said about letting the chosen spirituality of the church find practical expression in the life of the church has been by way of illustration. It is not being suggested that the four elements taken from Gutierrez' book are the best or only elements. However, what they (and the outworking of other spiritualities) point to, is the fact that the attention of church leadership needs to be more on church culture - the feel, ethos, spirit, and personality of the church - than on programmes, activities and events. Yet so often it is the latter, rather than the former, that is the focus of ministry and the agenda of church councils. Seeing that spirituality is the key to church life changes the whole focus of the church. As John Reader and Margaret Goodall in *The Earth Beneath* remind us, the task of leadership in the church is often simply:

To enable the congregation to move from the norm of jumble sales and coffee mornings, to that of being active in, and a redemptive influence upon, society.

Such a goal will not be attainable unless the ethos and culture of the church is addressed, and 'evangelised'; and that is unlikely to happen in a sustainable way, unless spirituality is built into the core nature of the church and its members.