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MINISTRY, SPIRITUALITY, AND DISCIPLINES FOR ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

Much has been written and continues to be written about spirituality. In this vigorous literary activity, there is neither uniform definition of terms nor set of practices associated with the development of one's spiritual life. Someone has suggested that spirituality is an "in" word these days. There is even a *Spirituality for Dummies* that "sparks [one's]. . . great spiritual wisdom in [one's] own perfectly individual way."¹

The most profound themes of western spirituality remind us that the God whom we seek and for whom we hunger is the God who seeks union with us—all of us and not a select few persons. All of us, who yearn to have our deep longing for God satisfied, discover meaning in our lives and can experience God's presence in our deepest need. At varying levels, many resources explore personal growth and development of the religious life, discipline, commitment, experiments in ways that prayer sustains one's spiritual life.

In theological education circles, the discussion centers on formation of a particular lifestyle and a search for direction to fulfill one's vocation. More importantly, there is the sense that being an educated and competent professional is not enough; there is equally a need for spiritual grounding.

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¹Sharon Janis, *Spirituality for Dummies* (Foster City, CA: IDG Books Worldwide, 2000), [1].

This concern for spirituality in one Jewish theological seminary is expressed as a desire to transform as well as to train. "The old way was to teach a rabbi what he needed to *know*. (Italics are the writer's for emphasis.) Yes, you must be rooted in the classical texts, but you must also be emotionally committed to Judaism. We are looking for people who want to *be* rabbis as much as they want to *become* rabbis."²

Here at ITC, we proclaim in our mission statement that we practice a "liberating spirituality." At least, we indicate that some attention may be given to it—what it means and what are evidences of its practice. The Association of Theological Schools, one of our accrediting agencies, anticipates some kind of response when they remind us in the preface to *Standard 3* that "a theological school is a community of faith and learning that cultivates habits of theological reflection, nurtures wise and skilled ministerial practice, and contributes to the formation of spiritual awareness and moral sensitivity."³

Then again in *Standard 4:1.1*:

In a theological school, the over-arching goal is the development of theological understanding, that is, aptitude for theological reflection and wisdom pertaining to responsible life in faith. Comprehended in this over-arching goal are others such as deepening spiritual awareness, growing in moral sensibility and character, gaining an intellectual grasp of the tradition of a faith community, and acquiring the abilities requisite to the exercise of ministry in that community.⁴

²Paul Wilkes, "The Hands That Would Shape Our Souls," *The Atlantic Monthly* 266, no. 6 (December 1990): 84.

³The Association of Theological Schools, *Bulletin 45, Part 1*, 2002 (Pittsburgh, PA: The Association, 2002), 50.

⁴*Ibid.*, 54.

Spirituality and spiritual formation are essential to the whole ecclesial community and not exclusively to the theological academic community. However, for persons preparing for full-time professional ministry, the importance of spirituality for the enrichment of the total church needs serious attention.

In a previous exploration of spirituality and spiritual formation within the seminary context, this writer noted: "If it is affirmed that spiritual formation is important, then the question is not so much: can it be taught, as how may it be encouraged and developed, how may we find and make time, create openness to and spaciousness for the soul's intercourse with God?"⁵ In order to pursue faithful and obedient ministry and so fulfill our vocation, persons called of God need to engage in a disciplined spiritual life. Consider that

[s]pirituality doesn't arrive fully formed without effort. Religions around the world demonstrate that spiritual life requires constant attention and a subtle, often beautiful technology by which spiritual principles and understandings are kept alive. For good reason we go to church, temple, or mosque regularly and at appointed times: it's easy for consciousness to become lodged in the material world and to forget the spiritual. Sacred technology is largely aimed at helping us remain conscious of spiritual ideas and values.⁶

⁵Michael I. N. Dash, "Exploring Spiritual Formation in the Classroom," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XX, nos. 1 and 2 (Fall 1992/Spring 1993): 59.

⁶Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 204.

Prayer, Bible study, and theological reflection inform our spirituality and give shape to the spiritual life. We bear a responsibility to share ideas and suggestions with others who may join us on this faith journey. Together, we can search for ways to live this Christian life and fulfill our calling.

Ministry and Discipleship

Ministry, like discipleship, begins with response to an invitation after an encounter with Jesus Christ. Jesus meets us wherever we are; he takes the initiative. Everyone who encounters God in Jesus Christ and responds to him is called by that encounter to a life of following Jesus, of being one of his disciples.

When Jesus chose his disciples, he chose them to learn a craft. To Simon and Andrew, he spoke of this craft as "fishing for men." In another place, he spoke of it as "laboring in a vineyard." Jesus seems to have used the term "apprentice" when speaking of his disciples. In the Aramaic, the spoken language of the Jews, there are two words, both of which can be translated "disciple." Some scholars believe that Jesus used the word that meant "apprentice" as opposed to the other word, which was translated "student." This latter term is what the disciples of the Rabbis were called. Both ideas are applicable to those who would be disciples of Jesus, for this discipleship involves learning of him and from him. It is not only skills development of a particular craft but also an earnest living according to his way, seeking to do his will and to know his teaching. Following Jesus and living the life to which he has called us is a life in the Spirit.

Jesus met a madman who lived in the graveyard. He had lost his name, becoming a split personality capable of hurting

himself. Jesus met and cured this man. Once healed, he wanted to lead a religious life—to follow Jesus. Jesus gave him an invitation into relationship, not only with himself but also with others. He sent the man back to his home and his village and to all the secular responsibilities, which he had so long left unfulfilled. He must find his place in the world and there, through the quality of his life, testify to the change—the radical transformation that Jesus effected in his life.

The Christian disciple is one who has been called out of the world only to be sent back again into it. This life of following Jesus, of being his disciple is a life to be lived “in Christ”—the work in the world. This two-way movement is characteristic of the disciple’s life. The disciple is thus a person who has responded to the invitation of Jesus: “Come!” and is sent into the world to tell the story of what Jesus has done and continues to do.

The New Testament uses the word “witness” to describe this relationship of the Christian disciple to the world. Jesus used it with his disciples: “You shall be my witnesses.” In another place, “You are witnesses of these things.” “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Receiving the Spirit in one’s life is *charisma*, “grace gift.” It cannot be earned; you cannot work for it; it can only be received as gift. It is this gift that empowers us to be disciples, witnessing to Jesus Christ in our lives. That was the promise fulfilled at Pentecost. “You shall receive power [*dunamis*] after the Holy Spirit is come upon you and you shall be my witnesses. . .(Acts 1: 8). The power of the Holy Spirit is explosive. It is dynamite. Our English word “dynamite” derives from that Greek word, *dunamis*. The power of

the Holy Spirit energizes us for the work of ministry.

Spirituality for ministry is essentially apostolic spirituality. It is

an active way of discipleship, a following in the footsteps of Jesus, in which believers participate in and further his saving mission. The heart of apostolic spirituality is the assurance that one has been sent [from the Greek *apostello*, which means, 'to send'] into the world to announce, in both word and deed, the saving power of God. . . . Apostolic spirituality continues the role of the first apostles. It implies a commitment to share Jesus' own saving mission of teaching, healing, reconciling, and calling all people to the fullness of life and to their full human dignity as creatures loved by God. . . . To give one's life daily, out of love, for the sake of the life of others is the true way to holiness and the most fitting response to the Holy God.⁷

Witness, Transformation and Becoming a Self before God

Witnessing, testifying so characteristic of the African-American worship experience, does not allow for fictive generation. This is what Arthur Hall from *Just Above My Head* is insisting: "I've got to live the life I sing about in my song."⁸

He means that he cannot afford to live a lie. For it is only by "living the life" one is able to express with any genuineness the pain *and* joy of life with Jesus. And even

⁷Barbara E. Bowe, *Biblical Foundations of Spirituality: Touching a Finger to the Flame* (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 2003), 18.

⁸James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head* (New York: Dell, 1979), 244.

though one person may be testifying, that testimony occurs in the community where others are listening, affirming, encouraging, and identifying with the speaker. In a real sense, it is their story as well.

The Christian witness is not essentially something a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ does, but fundamentally something a disciple is—all the time. When a room is so dark that you can see nothing in it, you provide a light—everything is clearly seen. This must be so wherever the Christian disciple illuminates the dark places of our world with the light of Christ. Sin and sorrow, suffering and death, have so darkened the horizons of the lives of many people that often they are unable to see the glory of God—God's face beyond those horizons.

Christian disciples are called to live their lives in such a manner that those who doubt God's goodness find it easier to believe that God is good because they know us. Those who find it difficult to believe in God's love in the midst of their grief and sorrow must find it easier to believe in God's love, because they know us. The essence of the Christian witness is this speaking of the whole of life, of life itself. Jesus says to us who bear his name, "You must so live that in your light God's face and God's glory may be seen." "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5: 16).

Calling, Character, and Conduct

Christian disciples are often given responsibility for leadership. Leaders arise from the community and are responsible to the community as bearers of the holy, a means by which the community is led into relationship with God.

Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. That is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was (Hebrews 5: 1-4).

At a deeper level, pastoral leadership derives from and is sustained through relationship with God. The ministry—the work we do—is neither an office, nor career, but rather a vocation and a calling. More importantly, our work does not separate us from others. Like them, in the fascinating phrase in Moffatt's translation of the passage from the letter to the Hebrews, "we wear the garment of human weakness." These are sobering thoughts when we would presume to judge others, since we are bound up with our fellow human beings in the bundle of life. Leaders who make the inward journey, both to their shadows and light, can take us beyond ourselves into a needy and hurting world. Leaders must also use the gifts with which they have been endowed so that the tasks of the community get done.

Over a year ago, our friends in the Roman Catholic Church were pervasively in the news over the incidence of pedophilia over a protracted period. There have been oblique comments that sexual misconduct, including pedophilia, is present among clergy in other denominations, but a culture of "respectable silence" prevents any public confession of this matter.

We have a tendency to magnify the concerns for sex

and sexuality in the character of the person in the leadership role. But the totality of one's being and conduct in every area of one's life is always open to scrutiny. We are no less accountable for the way in which we treat others, manage the resources entrusted to us, and how we use our time. Are we so busy doing our work, or do we make time to find God in the center of our prayer life so that we might discern where God is present in our world and join in the work that needs to be done? The coincidence between who we are in our person and what we do imbues us with the kind of authority to lead others. Indeed, it enables us to have wholeness—integrity that makes our work acceptable to God.

Exploring Knowledge and Faith, Intellect, and Spirit

Howard Thurman is known as one of the most popular American religious figures of the twentieth century. There are references to Thurman and his work in the writings of nearly every African-American religious scholar. His autobiography is entitled, *With Head and Heart*. As Luther Smith explains,

The head utilizes reason, thought, and concept to interpret the heart's exposure to feeling, sensation and experience. This is not done to demystify the mystery within the religious experience, but to explore and appreciate the depths of mystery. Rather than certainty over pure knowledge of God, the mysticism of Thurman evokes assurance, awe and wonder; sensations which are continually questioned and tested in order to attain some disclosure of God's will.⁹

⁹Luther E. Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic As Prophet* (Lanham, MD: The University Press of America, 1981), 66.

In one's work and person, knowledge and faith, intellect and spirit find unity.

In our seminary community, false notions of the separation of spirit and intellect surface from time to time. One of these false impressions is that you are truly spiritual when you trash intellect. "The Eurocentric influence of dualism is strong that this tendency to disjuncture [to separate spirit and intellect] is often exhibited in statement and in practice in our chapel experiences. Some preachers say: 'They taught me Bultmann, Tillich, Greek, but. . .' or 'as soon as I leave these halls, I will get back to Aunt Jane's stuff.'"¹⁰

There are recurring references to "Aunt Jane" both in African-American conversations and in general religious literature. The impression given is that Aunt Jane's experience of faith is a lower-level expression—uncomplicated and not demanding much thought. She represents the ordinary member in the pew who may not have had the privilege of education but is no less a deeply spiritual person who expresses her authentic experience of God and her faith journey in plain language and with strong conviction, testifying to the ways in which Jesus helped her "get over" as her soul looks back in wonder. In the academic community, we must recognize the authenticity of Aunt Jane's voice and permit her into the conversation with the voices of other persons who may have seminary education so that through these encounters we might discover how our common faith journey can be mutually enriched.

A challenge we have in theological education is to integrate the life of the spirit with the academic study of

¹⁰Michael I. N. Dash, Jonathan Jackson, and Stephen C. Rasor, *Hidden Wholeness: An African American Spirituality for Individuals and Communities* (Cleveland, OH: The United Church Press, 1997), 23.

theology. David Rensberger, one of our Bible colleagues at ITC, while studying Aramaic this past summer, discovered a little known writer, Isaac of Niniveh, also known as Isaac the Syrian. Isaac's reflections on the connections between knowledge and faith are extremely insightful. Isaac of Nineveh writes, "Indeed, without knowledge nothing can be done in daily life."¹¹

But Isaac also says that

knowledge can be opposed to faith when it remains materialistic and rationalistic, concerned only with the defense of our daily lives in this world, when it takes no concern for God and believes that everything that is needed can be achieved by human effort and knowledge. Thus knowledge without faith is opposed to faith, focused on self-enhancement and self-preservation, to the detriment of love for God and other people.¹²

St. Anselm offered a classic definition of theology: "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quaerens intellectum*). It is confirmation of the nexus between what we experience, what we know and how we talk about it, theologize, and make meaning of our encounter with God. And when we seek to articulate what it is that we have experienced, our theology provides us the way. It is our spirituality that enables us to do theology. We use our minds to engage in critical reflection on our lived faith experience and express our understanding of our reflection in confessional statements. We are asserting that the separation of faith from

¹¹Isaac, Bishop of Nineveh, *Mystic Treatises [on the Way of Monasticism]* (Wiesbaden: M. Sandig oH. G. 1969), 248.

¹²Ibid.

intellect and spiritual experience from academic theological reflection is false creation. To understand the nature of the Christian life is to pursue a disciplined study of the scriptures. We need to *know* the Word. Note what a fourth-century desert father, Abbott Palladius, says: "The soul that wishes to live according to the will of Christ should either learn faithfully what it does not yet know. But if, when it can, it desires to do neither of these things, it is afflicted with madness. For the first step away from God is a distaste for learning and lack of appetite for those things for which the soul hungers when it seeks God."¹³

Spirituality and Life in the Spirit

"Spirituality is a way of life committed to understanding the nature and urgings of the spirit; the life organizes all its desires, energy and resources so that they might be dominated by the spirit. Spirituality brings a harmony to living consistent with the peace and will of God."¹⁴ St. Paul speaks of this journey of discipleship as "walking according to the Spirit" (Romans 8: 4), which is an apt description of the spiritual life. In the New Testament the life of faith is drawn by the Spirit rather than driven by self.

Spirituality has to do with relationship with God. If it means anything at all, spirituality means life with God in Jesus Christ. It begins with an initial encounter and is sustained through a continuing relationship with

¹³Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: A New Directions Paperbook, 1960), 44-45.

¹⁴Smith, *Howard Thurman*, 12.

God in the discipline of daily life. It is further sustained by our willingness to be open and sensitive to the movement of the Spirit in our lives. It means seeking to live within God's will. God's will always challenges and calls us to love through our relationship to others, through offering our whole selves—body, mind, and spirit—to God.¹⁵

The Spirit needs unrestricted intercourse in our lives if we are to function fully as disciples of Jesus Christ. A life so full that it is cluttered up is a warehouse and not a home. When Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and mammon" (Matthew 6: 24), part of his meaning was that mammon was too absorbing, too filling of life's interests. Mammon is not possessions but the god of possessions. It is that possessiveness which gives to one's possessions a value more than they have in themselves. We need, therefore, to create space for the spirit in our lives.

Our challenge is to engage in a necessary self-examination to discover those things that clutter up our lives and block the free movement of the Spirit. The circumstances of our life make for empty spaces—poverty and want, sickness and weakness, lack of success in our endeavors, unfulfilled ambitions, disappointment in our family life. These empty spaces must be freed of all bitterness that possesses our minds and our spirits, if our lives are to become a dwelling place for the Spirit. God can fill every empty space in our lives with the Holy Spirit who enables us to live this life to which we are called.

So often we desire to hold on to things—attitudes, feel-

¹⁵Dash, *Hidden Wholeness*, xvi.

ings, memories—that make for obstacles, stumbling blocks in our lives. It is interesting that the Greek word for stumbling block is *skandalon*, “scandal.” The challenge we have is also a difficulty—that of “letting go”—*apolutruo*, “turning stuff loose.” That Greek verb for “letting go” is also the word to “forgive.” Forgiveness not offered is a stumbling block—a scandal that prevents the free movement of the Spirit in our lives. Only uncluttered emptiness leaves room for God in our lives and makes us open to the gifts that God has for us.

A Life That Includes Relationships with God, Self, and Others

Life in the community is the way by which our unique gifts are made available so that the common mission may be fulfilled. There is a description of life in the early Christian community in Acts 2, which reflects the ways in which we live in relationship to one another.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and in prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had every thing in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2: 42-47).

It is in the living Christian community that the *teaching* finds meaning. It is through the living Christian community that the *fellowship* finds expression. It is within the living Christian community that the *sacrament* is validated. It is in a living Christian community that the *liturgy* finds relevance.

A Rhythm for Life—Withdrawal and Engagement

It is a great temptation for those of us who are working for Jesus to think that the more we can do for him the better our time is spent—*work* but *rest*—refresh ourselves as well. “Come. . .go” is the rhythm of the Christian life. If we fail to adopt this rhythm for our lives, we expose ourselves to burnout—the feeling of exhaustion and depletion of one’s resources, making us incapable of fulfilling our responsibilities. It occurs when we do not attend to our spiritual life and come to know aridity and emptiness in our souls. To use a clichéd metaphor, “our tanks are empty and we are running on fumes.” We aggravate the situation when we believe that we must answer every call, have our cell phones on all the time, respond to each piece of e-mail *immediately*, be available “24/7.” “Such attempted omnipotence, coupled with a sentimental motivation, is doomed to quick exhaustion. No one can function as a pastor who depends on himself or herself alone. There has to be a place to feed the spirit—the caring other person and God. . .”¹⁶ Withdrawal and engagement is the rhythm of the Christian life.

This dynamic of withdrawal and engagement is not only an individual practice but also a communal one. The early communities of our slave ancestors had a habit of

¹⁶Urban T. Holmes, *Spirituality for Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1982), 48.

“stealing away” to the “hush harbors” to have a “little talk with Jesus.” In the dark of the night, this communal practice of contemplation, for that indeed is what it was, enabled them to endure and sustain life in the midst of the brutalities experienced during the day. In the “hush harbors,” this communal contemplative practice was opportunity for our ancestors to bring the totality of their being into communion with God. The conventions of the practice found expression in their full sensory experiences—engaging worship—*song, shout, dance, and moan*. It is out of these encounters came the spirituals. The shout enabled them to affirm as the Spirit moved among them in the community that the God who had been with them in all their trials was good. As they whirled in dance, possessed by the Spirit, they used their bodies as instruments to express and relieve the stress and hurt they knew while laboring from sunup to sundown. They were unashamed to moan, “acknowledging that as our ancestors and elders reminded us that there are some things that cannot be spoken out aloud but could only be understood as spirit speaks to spirit.”¹⁷

Barbara Holmes deals with this subject extensively in her book, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*.¹⁸ She demonstrates from her research that the contemplative experience is built into the African-American collective worship but is also the legacy of African Monasticism, a history of spiritual exemplars—a unique meditative worship practice. This duality of the spiritual jour-

¹⁷Commentary offered by DaVita CarterMcCallister, respondent to this lecture. CarterMcCallister is a 1998 graduate of ITC and serves as the national coordinator for the Fund for Theological Education in a pilot program with the United Church of Christ.

¹⁸See Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

ney—withdrawal and engagement—is dialectic of growth in the faith both for individual and communal practice.

Francis of Assisi forsook the wealth into which he was born to become a monk. In his early days in the monastery, one of his assignments was to serve in the kitchen—the scullery. Among his tasks, he had to scrub the pots and pans, sweep and mop the floor, and take out the trash. But he went about his duties, always with a song on his lips. It was said of Francis that he transformed the *tedium* of the scullery into the *Te Deum* of the sanctuary.

African-American Women Perspectives of Life in the Spirit

“Spirituality is about living through the moments of struggle and the moments of peace and ultimately acquiring a better life, a life that is filled with a deeper knowledge of God. This better life comes from the onset of not only public political confrontation but also personal affirmation and development over time.”¹⁹ This citation is from Marla Frederick who spent a year here at ITC as a womanist scholar. In her highly creative work, *Between Sundays*, she contends that to be a black woman of faith in the American South is to understand—and experience—spirituality in a particular way. She illustrates the need to move beyond common misconceptions and narrow assumptions about black religion and into the actual complexities of African-American women’s spiritual lives. Through careful analysis, we see how spirituality—expressed as gratitude, empathy, or righteous discontent—operates as a transformative power in women’s

¹⁹Marla F. Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 14.

interactions with others and in their own more intimate renegotiations of self. Spirituality for these women, parishioners in a North Carolina Baptist church, is seen as making space for creative agency, giving voice to multi-faceted ways in which women interpret, inform, and reshape their social conditions. Spirituality for these women, as well as for African Americans, empowers them to live in the midst of complex social realities and make meaning out of those situations, sustained by their faith.

It is from "wading through many sorrows" that a theology of suffering emerges. "[It] seeks on behalf of the African American community whose lives and struggles it honors and serves, to understand and clarify the meaning of the liberating Word and deed of God in Jesus of Nazareth for all women and men who strive against the principalities and structures, the powers and forces of evil. A theology from a womanist perspective is characterized by remembering and retelling, by resisting and redeeming."²⁰ These recollections are ways by which the depth of African-American women's spirituality can be explored and discovered.

bell hooks's insightful essay, "Walking in the Spirit,"²¹ proposes that

cultivating the spiritual life can enhance the self-recovery process. . . . In fiction by contemporary black women writers, healing takes place only when black female characters find the divine spirit within and nurture it. This is true for Avey in *Praisesong for the Widow*, for Celie in *The Color Purple*, for Baby Suggs in *Beloved*, for Indigo in *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*, and countless

²⁰Emilie M. Townes, ed., *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 124.

²¹bell hooks, "Walking in the Spirit," in *My Soul Is a Witness: African American Women's Spirituality*, ed. Gloria Wade-Gayles (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 342.

other characters. For some of these characters, spirituality is linked to the Christian faith; for others, African and Caribbean religious traditions. And in some cases, like that of Shug in *The Color Purple*, a break must occur with Christianity in order for a new spirituality to emerge.²²

In a work dealing with the transmission of spiritual values or moral wisdom, Teresa Fry Brown follows a procession of African-American writers who seek to give voice to assert the authenticity of their experiences in shaping their character, lives, and spirituality. Brown documents how African-American grandmothers, mothers, and other mothers contribute to the process. She illustrates how generations of African-American families, churches, and communities have handed down the values that we cherish through the use of stories, biblical mandates, precepts, and examples. She interprets the saying from her title, *God Don't Like Ugly*, by stating that it is

[a]n old saying in African American families, churches and communities that means that God does not like us to behave in ways that are not Christ-like. Adults or elders are instructed to 'train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it' (Proverbs 22: 6). What we learn as children is with us throughout our lives—good, bad or indifferent. We are called to act as if we or our parents or someone raised us to act appropriately in all circumstances. It means that we are ultimately accountable to God for everything

²²Ibid.

that we do.²³

Each of these black women scholars illustrates ways in which their several understandings and use of spirituality inform the daily life of the women observed and about whom they are writing. Indeed, the spirituality of these women helps them to make meaning of their experiences, empowers them for the tasks they perceive need to be accomplished, the appropriate responses, the choices and decisions they need to make. Though the voices of the women are diverse as is the articulation of their insights, for them their spirituality, informed not exclusively by religious faith, empowers them to maintain their life journey and engage in meaningful service in the midst of the complexities of daily life. These stories contribute to a deepened understanding of how life, faith, religion, and culture conjoin in a process for meaningful existence.

Spirituality, Vocation and Ministry— Necessary Connections

The nature of ministry is a continuing engagement in witness, love, and service. It is seeking to interpret the encounter we have with God that results in fulfilling our calling through the exercise of faithful and obedient ministry. It is living so that God can use us, anywhere, at any time. And the end of our ministry is maturing in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4: 13). There is no way we can experience our full personhood in Jesus Christ except by being engaged in ministry.

²³Teresa L. Fry Brown, *God Don't Like Ugly: African American Women Handing on Spiritual Values* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 88-89.

Let us examine several Scripture passages, allowing us to reflect on different aspects of personhood, our life, and our ministry. In Genesis 12: 2-3, God promises Abram that he will become the leader of a great nation and that this people would be the means by which other peoples will be blessed. In Genesis 4: 9f, the relationship of responsibility for the other is established in the question that God asks of Abel: "Where is your brother?" In one Old Testament story in Genesis 25:29-34, Esau comes home tired after his hunt. He finds Jacob eating porridge. Esau says to him, "Give me some." To which Jacob replies, "I will exchange it for your inheritance." What is this inheritance? It was God's promise to Abraham: "I will bless you, and in you all the nations of the world will bless themselves" (Genesis 12: 2-3). The inheritance was "other people." Esau's answer to Jacob was a simple one: "What I want is porridge. I don't want other people." This perspective suggests that people and their needs, not programs, constitute authentic ministry.

The challenge to ministry is that we accept Jesus Christ and serve him. In Matthew 25: 31-40 in the parable of the sheep and the goats, our neighbor becomes the person whom we must serve, to whom we must minister. "I have AIDS," Jesus cries, but it is my neighbor whom he is describing. I may find it difficult to love my neighbor, but it should not be impossible to love Jesus. I may find it easy to love Jesus and have great difficulty in loving my neighbor—the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned, the sick. Yet, I may not love Jesus apart from loving my neighbor. My neighbors—others—are gifts from God and opportunities for me to express my love for God. In this situation, I meet Jesus Christ in my neighbor, but my neighbor meets Jesus Christ in me. The decision for neighbor goes to the heart of

a person's response to God. The ongoing challenge is to combine genuine spiritual experience with a real passion for improving the welfare of persons in the social-economic-political order. The heart of ministry is this self-giving to others (Matthew 13: 44). We cannot work for God unless we make God's work our own by putting everything we have—investing our all in that work.

We may describe Christian discipleship as vocation—hearing God's call. But we must not relegate the concept exclusively to those whom we term religious. God's call is offered to all who encounter Jesus and respond to him. As we discern our vocation as Christian disciples, and engage in a life, walking according to the Spirit, we are challenged to find ways to join with others, who like ourselves, are on a journey in search for God. These are all interrelated in a process of fulfilling our calling of being in ministry as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Disciplines for the Spiritual Life

We have been exploring understanding spirituality and particularly those perspectives that affect ways in which we engage in ministry. To be in ministry is to be engaged in living, along with others, a life in the Spirit. But this spiritual life requires that we engage in discipleship that empowers us to be faithful and obedient in life and work. Hence, we will now examine disciplines for the spiritual life.

Jesus highlighted the importance of preparation in advice he gave about building and going to war (Luke 14:28f). One of the expectations of discipleship, of following Jesus, is counting the cost. Jesus is warning against casual discipleship, approaching the engagement in ministry in

a brash way, a response of impulse. He is challenging us, as he demanded his first disciples, to be fully prepared and not settle for just average work. He is also reminding us that to be in ministry for and with him, we have to be prepared for the long haul, to stay the course.

The Christian life is an extremely demanding one. Paul reminds the Corinthians of the rigors of this life, when he uses images from athletics. In order to participate in the games, whether in Corinth or Olympia, athletes had to undergo the sternest self-discipline. They subjected themselves to these strenuous exercises in order to win a crown of laurel leaves that would wither in a few days. Paul proposes as Christian disciples that we also engage in no less a disciplined life to win the crown, which is eternal life. He understood the demands of discipline when he writes, "So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air, but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9:26-27). The athletic efficiency that Paul describes is not attainable without regular practice and without spending time; it is not possible to grow in the Christian life without the same kind of discipline. Understanding those who earnestly engaged in the Civil Rights Movement, meant keeping "their eyes on the prize" in spite of the brutal experiences encountered.

The assumption is often made that because we are his servants, we are inoculated against adverse circumstances. The human experience assures us his presence in those situations and the promises of strength he offers. The power of the Holy Spirit is that resource that enables us to live in the world, as God would have us live. It is not independent of the disciplines, which may follow, or the mastery of

skills that we can acquire. Essentially, it comes from turning to God.

We will now examine the traditional spiritual disciplines of the Christian life: prayer and Bible study.

Prayer As Discipline: Prayer As Abandonment to God

The gospels present us with many glimpses into Jesus' prayer life, providing clues for our own disciplined prayer life. Jesus seems to have preferred out-of-doors for his own personal meditation. He went up a hill to pray (Luke 6:12). He went to a lonely place, often described as a desert place, to be alone, to be private (Mark 1:15). But Jesus did not rule out indoors for privacy. "Go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matthew 6: 6). The important thing about a prayer place is that it helps us to pray better. Selecting the right location is one of the keys to an effective prayer life.

When we examine the times that Jesus chose for prayer, the gospels say: "In the morning, while it was still dark, he got up and went to a deserted place, and there he prayed (Mark 1: 35). "[Jesus] went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God" (Luke 6: 12). While the impulse to pray may sometimes be spontaneous, unless there is a commitment to fixed times, it is not easy to pray. Finding the right schedule for *daily* prayer requires experimentation as well as determined dedication. Finding a schedule that fits in with your lifestyle may take months. But once the routine is developed, it will be worth the investment. Prayer may be described as the fundamental

discipline of the spiritual life. "Life without prayer weakens my spirit. . . . Without prayer I become irritable, tired, heavy of heart, and I lose the Spirit who directs my attention to the needs of others instead of my own. Without prayer, my attention moves to my own preoccupation. I become cranky and spiteful and often I experience resentment and a desire for revenge."²⁴

Bible Study

As Christians, we claim that the Bible is the source-book of our faith—story of humankind's response to God's actions. That response has sometimes been rejection, sometimes acceptance and obedience. Jesus Christ is God's "act of acts." The acts of God are narrated in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and lead us to Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, the acts of God recorded there, flow from him, so that Jesus himself is revealed in his full meaning, or as we see him, in the total context of the biblical witness. We affirm that the Bible is both a word in a particular historical situation as well as a word for us today. Our challenge in using the Bible is to rediscover its faith. This rediscovery, through disciplined Bible study, enables us to meet the God of the Bible who reveals who God is in the Word. The biblical text continually challenges us to re-think who we are and what we are meant to be.

Bible study becomes extremely important for those who must communicate the Word of God. We live in an age where people enjoy interesting conversation, even though

²⁴Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Gracias! A Latin American Journal* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 44.

they really don't understand each other; it is only the unity of word *and* deed that can be effective. "The kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power (*dunamis*)."²⁵ There is that word again—dynamite, explosive power (I Corinthians 4: 20). The smallest act is more than the greatest speech. We are challenged to be technicians, have the *techné*—the skill for our craft. Jesus was a carpenter who understood this need for precision. If a doorstep is built one inch too high, people will stumble over it. Speaking imprecisely is the same as speaking untruthfully. Through our words, we witness what we believe and how we live our lives. One may choose words well and pronounce them with great conviction and passion, but their effect may only make people *think* one is interesting or intelligent. It is in our walking the life we do God's will. This will allow the Spirit to make Jesus known to others, and they too will come to love and obey him also.

Moreover, we must not forget that the word of God issues challenges. "The scriptures are not a passive storehouse of answers. We indeed read the Bible, but we can also say that the Bible 'reads us.' In many instances, our questions will be reformulated. For example, when Jesus is asked: 'Who is my neighbor?', he reverses the terms of the question and inquires in turn: 'Which of these three . . . proved neighbor to the man?' (Luke 10: 29, 36)."²⁵ It is with this expectation and anticipation that we should approach Bible study, prepared not only to deal with the questions, but also the demand of the answers.

²⁵Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 34.

Other Disciplines for Consideration

Let us identify other disciplines that can strengthen us for engagement in ministry and discipleship for Jesus Christ. There is much similarity among them, as they all demand openness to ways in which we can be present to God, and God can reveal God's presence to us.

Quiet Time

When we surrendered our lives to God, promising to follow Jesus and allowing him to lead and direct our lives, many of us made the assumption that the commitment was enough. We've given our life to Jesus. We sang with evangelical fervor, "All to Jesus I surrender, all to him I freely give." We thought this was sufficient to ensure our awareness of God's presence in our lives. Alas, we awake from our naiveté to discover that the covenant we made will never become real until we reserve, hold back, make time for us to be with God alone, our souls and God. This demands discipline.

There are no easy strategies for making and keeping quiet time with God. As we attempt to be quiet in God's presence, we initially become distracted by our own inner noises—the anxieties and worries of our souls. But like most disciplines the practice gradually leads us into that silence where God speaks to us.

Silence

We are so accustomed to sound and activity that the idea of silence becomes terrifying even in worship services, particularly in our Protestant tradition. In spite of our

efforts, perhaps feeble or non-expectant affirming responses, we have not succeeded in developing a "culture of silence" within the worship services here in our chapel at ITC. Even the invitation to intercessory prayer does not provide enough space for naming in our hearts those for whom we wish to especially pray. The space appears like a rolling pause, not enough for silence. We tend to become restless, wondering when the period will be over. Rather than give up on the opportunity to encourage the discipline of silence, we need to help persons to understand the experience, the blocks, pressures, and resistance to the discipline. We need to develop ways to experiment with the discipline and gradually an emerging culture will celebrate its value for spiritual life in community.

If the attempts and experiences of the discipline are difficult to achieve in community life, they are no less so in our personal devotional life. Yet it is in the silence, without words, that communication between God and us can take place. We can acknowledge who we are and gradually come to the realization that who we are is because of who God is, and we can only receive ourselves as a gift from God. The Psalmist offers us a process and assures us of promises to be fulfilled: "For God alone my soul waits in silence for my hope is in [God]. [God] alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God" (Psalm 62: 5-7).

Listening

One of the essential disciplines of the spiritual life is our need to listen to God. But our difficulty in listening to God is that we want God to speak to us in terms of our own pre-

occupations, whereas God speaks to us in terms of the task with which we must be occupied. It is not that God will not speak to us concerning the varied concerns of our daily life: God is concerned and cares. All that God has to say to us is centered on the way in which we live our lives and our concentration on the carrying out of God's will. If we lose this focus, we will miss what God is saying.

Listening enables us to be tuned in and become attentive to that small voice, even a whisper. God comes to us and seeks to get our attention, as God came to Elijah, not only in spectacular and dramatic ways. In the Elijah story, there was first a great and strong wind. But the Lord was not in the wind. Next, there was an earthquake, and then a fire. And after that there was absolute quiet. Elijah heard the voice of God as the voice of a gentle stillness—a whisper (I Kings 19: 9).

Our anxieties about our life situation create so much noise in our lives, noise not only from the outside but noise also in our souls that it becomes difficult to hear the voice of God. The decibels of the noises deafen us.

Thus our lives become absurd. In the word 'absurd' we find the Latin word *surdus*, which means deaf. A spiritual life requires discipline because we need to learn to listen to God, who constantly speaks but we seldom hear. When, however, we learn to listen, our lives become obedient lives Jesus' life was a life of obedience. He was always listening to the Father, always attentive to his voice, always alert for his directions. Jesus was 'all ear.' That is true prayer: being all ear for God. The core of all prayer is indeed listening, obediently standing in the presence of God. . . .²⁶

²⁶Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1981), 66-68.

Although we have dealt with *quiet time*, *silence* and *listening* as separate disciplines, they are tri-dimensional aspects of contemplation, which characterize not only our silent prayer, but provide the lens through which we approach ministry. There are two additional disciplines that can strengthen us for ministry: journaling and "Sabbath time."

Journaling

Journaling experiences of our encounters with God is a discipline pursued by the mystics as well as those who make no great claims to deep spiritual experiences. A spiritual journal enables us to share ourselves with God and ourselves. In it we can pour out our thoughts to God. It becomes a written record of our experiences as we seek to live this life of faith. Our thoughts, our feelings, our understanding, and interpretations of those life experiences become the subjects of our journaling. Because our record is in writing, we can also return to our journal to discover whether we have grown spiritually or perhaps have grown careless and undisciplined. It is an essential requirement for our journal writing that we be honest with ourselves.

A spiritual journal is not a diary. A diary is a record of daily events, including reflection on the events experienced, the persons with whom we have interacted, and our sentiments about these persons and interactions. Records in a spiritual journal need not be of daily experiences. Rather, they note those encounters with God that offer special meaning and significance for us, challenge us to deep reflection. The focus of the spiritual journal is not so much on us, as it is on ways in which we discern the presence of

God in our lives, the measures of God's grace, and the messages God gives us through our encounter. Journaling then becomes a way through which we enter into conversation with God, always careful to be tuned in to what God has to say to us, what God has to reveal to us, and what God requires of us.

There is not one set of guidelines that can enhance the discipline of keeping a spiritual journal. Here are some questions that can guide us in the process:

- What are those events that provide special meaning or insight into myself as a person, as a Christian, as one engaged in ministry?
- Where am I finding joy and inspiration in the experience? What depresses me? Where am I experiencing the absence of God or finding it difficult to discover God's presence?
- How am I integrating the experiences into my prayer life?
- How are my experiences helping me to become more deeply aware of God in my life, the nature, and quality of our relationship?
- How are my encounters with God enabling me to discern God's will and purpose for my life at this time?
- What is the word that God has for me in the midst of the situations and experiences I encounter, especially with other persons?

“Sabbath Time”

The idea of “Sabbath” is a significant contribution from Jewish spirituality. Abraham Heschel points out that the

meaning of Sabbath is a celebration of time rather than space. "Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things from space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to *holiness in time*. It is a day on which we are called upon to share on what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world."²⁷

Tilden Edwards, in his preface to *Sabbath Time*, hopes that work would "open and deepen for us the promise of Sabbath time as an integral dimension of the Christian life that touches all other dimensions positively."²⁸ He sets the practice of Sabbath within the context of ministry, "one that offers an alternative to the growing societal rhythm between driven achievement and narrow escape, a deadly rhythm that threatens to bury ever more deeply the fullness and sanity of our human calling in God."²⁹ Sabbath time helps bridge the divide between a life of contemplation and a life of action. We are persuaded of the value of the discipline for our spiritual life. We are equally offered ways that can shape understandings of Sabbath and its practices for the enrichment not only of our own lives but those of others—our companions on this faith journey.

Exploring the Disciplines in Community and Communion with Others

When the writer worked in New York, he discovered a tradition among Baptists of gathering on a Monday morn-

²⁷Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: The Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1951), 10.

²⁸Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1992), 13.

²⁹*Ibid.*

ing for prayer, Bible study, and a preaching session. The experiences continued for a couple of hours, including one of the members offering explanation of the Sunday school lesson for the following week. Then, there was preaching. Those who participated in these group meetings attested to the multi-faceted value of the experience: they were inspired and uplifted by the preaching and received good ideas for sermons from one another. And always there was the fellowship, which created opportunities to swap “battle stories”—of the difficult member—brother, sister, trustee, or finance secretary. In the many conversations and sidebars, they drew strength and inspiration. This communal discipline occurs in other places across the African-American religious experience. It is a spiritual discipline that has enriched many lives and enhanced many ministries.

Conclusion

Spirituality has to do with living life in the Spirit, being nourished by the Spirit, being attentive to the Spirit, being empowered by the Spirit. All who encounter Jesus Christ and make the decision to follow him are called to a life of discipleship—of witnessing in our words, and deeds, and indeed through our lives to the meaning of that encounter. To aid us, we are gifted with the Holy Spirit who empowers for the tasks of ministry. In order to maintain and cherish the gift, we are encouraged to pursue spiritual disciplines that can enrich our lives and prepare us for the tasks of ministry. We work with others who are also gifted by God in Jesus Christ for the work he entrusted to us. But our work is to the end that we all become spiritually mature in Jesus Christ. This is not possible apart from our engage-

ment in ministry alongside of others. Spirituality is essential to the whole Christian community and not exclusively to the theological academic community. However, those of us who are responsible for preparing persons for full-time, professional ministry, the importance of spirituality for the enrichment of all who pursue the Christian life cannot be minimized.