

Seven ways the pastor can nurture personal and congregational spiritual growth and formation

A pastor begins with an understanding that he/she is on a personal spiritual journey. The pastor makes sure that his/her own soul is nurtured by regularly practicing spiritual disciplines and cultivating spiritual depth.

Clemmons, William P. *Discovering the Depths: Guidance in Personal Spiritual Growth*, Revised Edition, Broadman Press, ©1987.

William Clemmons wrote this book while a professor at Southeastern Seminary, a Southern Baptist Theological school. He currently teaches at the American Baptist affiliate, Northern Theological Seminary. In the introduction, the author tells us the book is directed toward helping you explore your “unique-self-in-Christ” through a process of being opened up to new levels of your journey in Christ. Chapters take the reader through the inner journey and are packed with theological and spiritual challenges like “wasting time for God.” Writers like Thomas Merton and Teilhard de Chardin are often quoted. The most helpful aspect is the exercise for meditation at the end of each chapter.

Donnelly, Doris. *Spiritual Exercises: Everyday Exercises for Body and Soul*, HarperSanFrancisco, ©1993.

That Doris Donnelly starts this remarkable book of everyday exercises with “Listening” tells us everything about her view of the spiritual life. All spiritual growth begins with listening and each of the remaining ordinary experiences — praising, eating, working, weeping, laughing, forgiving, and persevering — flow from this premise. Chapters are consistently organized with a section at the end containing practical ideas for implementing the exercise at hand. The author’s experience as a professor of Spiritual Theology gives the book depth and breadth. One would be hard put to find anything more inspiring, thoughtful and practical than this well-written handbook for spiritual growth.

Rolheiser, Ronald. *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*, Doubleday, ©1999.

Ronald Rolheiser is a member of a missionary order in the Roman Catholic Church dedicated to serving the poor. He says, “To serve the poor means to try to make the word of God and God’s consolation available in a language that is accessible to everyone and not just to those who have the privilege of advanced academic training.” This is the gift of this amazing book. Rolheiser has an uncanny ability to craft an idea in a way that brings fresh meaning to old truth. With surprising clarity, the author answers the question “What is Spirituality?” by helping us understand such basic concepts as soul, desire and spirit. In this day of mass-market spirituality, his reasoned discussions challenge and ground us while affirming our own search. Alan Jones, Dean of Grace Episcopal Cathedral in San Francisco, calls this book a “much needed antidote to the consumerist view of religion; this book is both a delight and a challenge to read.”

Nouwen, Henri J.M. *Here and Now: Living in the Spirit*, The Crossroad Publishing Co., ©1994.

In his characteristically honest and insightful style, the author describes the many ways the spirit of God is revealed in the ordinary events of our lives, here and now. Henri Nouwen was a Roman Catholic priest, professor and member of Daybreak, a L’Arche community in Ontario Canada. His untimely heart attack in 1996 at the age of 63 took his life, but we are left with a legacy of writings that will nurture generations of spiritual seekers to come. In this reviewer’s mind, this is one of his most succinct and helpful books.

Romney, Rodney. *Wilderness Spirituality: Finding Your Way in an Unsettled World*, Element Books Inc, ©1999.

Rod Romney was Senior Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Seattle, Washington for twenty years. He composed this 284-page book in 1999 just before his retirement. Using the metaphor of wilderness, the book is organized into two broad sections. The first explores seven images of wilderness experience while the second describes seven wilderness “markers,” each of which provides the foundation for what the author calls Beatitudes of the New Wilderness. For example, marker 7 is “waiting.” Its beatitude reads, “Blessed are those who wait upon God, for they shall renew their strength and deepen their faith.” Romney’s spiritual depth and personal experience permeate each chapter giving rich textures of meaning to his ideas. At times, his political views crackle through the pages like bolts of lightning. For those who share his politics, his applications will be a welcome challenge. For others, his agenda may be an annoying dead-end turn on an otherwise fresh and life-giving journey through the wilderness.

Edwards, Tilden. *Living in the Presence: Disciplines for the Spiritual Heart*, HarperSanFrancisco, ©1987.

Tilden Edwards is an Episcopal priest and the founding director of the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Bethesda, Maryland. He is a seasoned spiritual director and has authored many books in the field of spiritual formation. Written for “active people caring for the world through countless vocations,” this book offers spiritual guidance and practical exercises for those of all denominations who have a desire to explore their faith development. “Every person is a special kind of contemplative,” Edwards writes, “examining the many dimensions of human life, with an eye to the ways each can be an arena of attentiveness to God and our true identity in God.” Divided into two sections, his insights are readily accessible. Part One is organized into chapters by theme (for example, Grounding, Embodiment, Seeing, Acting) and offers exercises for personal growth. His section about praying with icons is an excellent introduction to an often-unexplored prayer form. Part Two explores how we can support our personal growth by “practicing the presence” in small groups. Written by a skilled spiritual practitioner, this book will reward you, stimulate you and nurture your growth for many years.

Hinson, E. Glenn. *Spiritual Preparation for Christian Leadership*, Upper Room Books, ©1999.

In a short three-year program, it is an impossible task for seminaries to fully prepare people for ministry. Biblical studies, ethics, theology and missiology seem to win curriculum wars every time. What about spiritual preparation? By that, the author means the kind of preparation that deepens our faith maturity and allows us to be with people in the depth of their needs and hurts, offering salt and light to them and our world. After affirming the need for spiritual formation for ordained church leaders, he offers ways to maintain spiritual health in the midst of active ministry and leadership. His chapters include accountability, time management and the interface between sexuality and spirituality. He concludes with an interesting section on personality and spirituality. Glenn Hinson has been a professor of spirituality and church history at Southern Baptist and Catholic theological schools and universities. He is an active leader of the United Methodist’s Upper Room ministries and gives retreats around the world.

2. The pastor understands that spiritual guidance is a central aspect of his or her pastoral work and leadership in the congregation.

Baker, Howard. *Soul Keeping: Ancient Paths of Spiritual Direction*, Navpress, ©1998.

Howard Baker is a spiritual director for the Rocky Mountain Region of Young Life and serves as an instructor in spiritual formation at Denver Seminary. The Navigators published this title as part of a series of books, edited by Dallas Willard, exploring the devotional life. Part One is a personal invitation to what the author calls “soul keeping” in which he gives his own experiences with the struggles, joys and hurdles of the spiritual life. Part Two looks at ancient paths of spiritual formation that shed light and offer wisdom to those of us trying to live a spiritual life in the modern world. The examples are short, easy to understand and practical. In addition to serving as a primer for church leaders, this book might be a good choice for a Sunday school elective or a small group wanting an introduction to spiritual formation.

Guenther, M. *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, Cowley Publications, ©1992.

The title of this book aptly describes Margaret Guenther's sensitive and wise writing. She discusses the spiritual director's role in terms of hospitality, good teaching, midwifery and women's issues with many illustrations of these traits through encounters with directees. She also discusses how God's leading can be discerned in the ordinary moments of our days as well as the more noticeable events and transitions of our lives. This book is a contemplative, practical guide to anyone aspiring to become a "holy listener."

May, Gerald. *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit: Psychiatric Dimensions of Spiritual Direction*, HarperSanFrancisco, ©1982.

For many years, Gerald May worked as a psychiatrist in private practice serving patients and teaching in institutions ranging from hospitals to prisons. More recently, he has served as a staff member of the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Bethesda, Maryland. At first glance, this book seems weighty and theoretical. A closer look reveals a practical, experiential approach to the important topic of the interrelatedness of mental health, psychology and spiritual direction. From clear definitions of common spiritual and psychological terms, to descriptions of dark night experiences (a sense of abandonment by God,) it would be difficult to find a more readable text from a more authoritative author. This is a source book deserving more than one visit.

3. In addition to offering academic bible study to the congregation, the pastor introduces forms of scripture reading that include prayer and devotion such as *lectio divina* and helps congregants explore silence and meditation in these settings.

Vest, Norvene. *Gathered in the Word: Praying the Scripture in Small Groups*, Upper Room Books, ©1996.

This book can be seen as a compliment to Thelma Hall's book, *Too Deep For Words*. While both books explore the power of *lectio divina*, a Benedictine form of praying with scripture, Norvene Vest writes of its potential in a small group environment. She begins with a clear usable outline of the *lectio divina* process and then creates an imaginary small group where she puts this process into practice. As this group moves through the book, she applies each aspect of the work to the group and allows us to listen in. This helpful technique allows readers to imagine themselves as part of the group or as the organizer of this kind of small group ministry. Here is a well-designed, well-written practical resource for small group work with scripture as the centerpiece. Norvene Vest is a retreat leader and spiritual director who has written her own commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict called, *Preferring Christ*.

Smith, Martin L. *The Word Is Very Near You: A Guide to Praying With Scripture*, Cowley Publications, ©1989.

Martin Smith begins with this thought: "In prayer we are never getting a conversation going with God. We are continuing a conversation which God has begun." What follows is a persuasive invitation to meditative prayer. This book is a welcome resource for anyone desiring to encounter God through meditation with scripture. The author suggests that meditative prayer using scripture creates an especially "favorable condition" for God to speak to us. In Part One, Smith gently persuades us to shift our focus from prayer as an act we perform to prayer as a response to God's reaching out to us. In Part Two, he provides hundreds of scriptural passages, arranged thematically, to serve as a reference for those who want to move from prayer as duty to meditative, receptive prayer with Scripture. Martin L. Smith is an Episcopal priest and a member of the Society of St. John the Evangelist.

Green S.J., Thomas H. *A Vacation with the Lord: A Personal Directed Retreat Based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, Ignatius Press, ©2000.

When it comes to personal directed retreats, the Jesuits deserve our respect. They not only provide methodology, they have experience — Jesuits are required to take long retreats at certain intervals in their lives. Thomas Green is a Jesuit priest and seasoned retreat master. In this book, he condenses a thirty-day Jesuit-style retreat into eight days but also makes it clear that the themes and structure could be creatively adapted for shorter periods of time, even fitting into our daily routines. Green explains that Ignatius divided his retreats (described in his classic work, *The Spiritual Exercises*) into four weeks. These are not calendar weeks, rather, they are thematic weeks. Week one is concerned with self-knowledge and self-opening to God. Week two, the heart of the retreat, focuses on being filled with Christ, week three carries the theme of calvary and week four encompasses resurrection. He designs the eight-day retreat around these four themes. The author says, “A good retreat is a vacation with the Lord. It should be a joyous time — time of hard work, probably, but a work that you thoroughly enjoy.” This book shows ~~us~~ how.

Hall, Thelma. *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*, Paulist Press, ©1988.

For anyone looking for an introduction to praying with scripture in the style of *lectio divina*, this is a must-read. Two distinct sections make this short book immediately accessible and practical. Section one is the author’s call to the contemplative life. In it, she takes the reader through a step by step introduction to the phases of *lectio divina*: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditating), *oratio* (praying) and *contemplatio* (resting). Her insights into this age old “methodless method” spring from a wealth of personal experience as a spiritual director. Not only does she describe the process of *lectio* for the novice in a simple and clear way, she then provides examples of scripture which allow the reader to immediately put *lectio* into practice. In the second half of the book, she lists over 500 scripture texts, organized under fifty themes. Examples of these themes are: God’s Promises, Lent, Compassion, Stewardship, Suffering, Children, Doing Justice, Trust and Relationships.

4. The pastor trusts in the ability and wisdom of lay persons to offer mutual spiritual support and direction to one another and helps to create opportunities where group spiritual guidance can occur.

Dougherty, Rose Mary. *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment*. (Book and Video). Paulist Press, ©1995.

Here is a book for those who want to explore the possibilities of spiritual direction in the context of a small group. The author begins by defining spiritual direction and describes how direction and the process of discernment walk hand in hand. She then describes the possibilities, practicalities and pitfalls of direction and discernment in a group setting and concludes with an exploration of the contemplative dimension of group process. Rose Mary Dougherty, a member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, currently serves as Director for Spiritual Guidance at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Bethesda, MD. She describes her primary assumption as follows: “group spiritual direction is the contemplative stance of presence to God for one another within the group meeting and prayer for one another outside the meeting.” Understood in this way, group spiritual direction is probably what many people in the church are looking for. This book is a challenging and indispensable resource for small group prayer ministry.

Gemignani, Michael. *To Know God: Small Group Exercises for Spiritual Formation*, Judson Press, ©2001.

Michael Gemignani is the pastor of an Episcopal church in Texas and chair of the division of spiritual formation for the Episcopal diocese there. His book offers new possibilities both for small groups and for spiritual formation. For small group ministry it opens the possibility of group discernment and group spiritual process and for spiritual formation it extends the options beyond a one-to-one relationship. One of the most helpful aspects of his writing is the clarity with which he defines spiritual terminology. For example on page 95 the author distinguishes between spiritual direction and psychotherapy - two important ways of assisting people on their life journey but each with a different intent and focus. From pastors to spiritual directors, Sunday school teachers to bible study leaders, these exercises provide a welcome practical dimension to group work and can be used effectively in a variety of settings.

5. The pastor explores alternatives to *Robert's Rules of Order* when conducting the administrative aspects of the church. A process of congregational discernment in decision-making is developed.

Morris, Danny E. and Charles M. Olsen. *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church*, Upper Room Books, ©1997.

The spiritual practice of discernment may be a lost art in the modern church. This book could go a long way in providing a remedy for that unfortunate reality. In a short five chapters the authors cover the what, why, who, how and where of discernment. They ask important questions such as, "instead of relying on Robert's Rules of Order, what would happen if people in churches made decisions based on their spiritual discernment of the question: "God, is this your will?" Reaching into history and drawing from many models, the authors offer practical and proven ways a church can move from a business as usual approach to one of depth, integration and love in the decision-making process. This is a book about the church as a genuine community, seeking life and anticipating God's future.

Brinton, Howard. *Reaching Decisions: The Quaker Method*, Pendle Hill Publications.

When it comes to discernment, the Quaker tradition offers wisdom, insight and practical methodology. While the focus of this book is on the specifics of that methodology, the entire Pendle Hill catalogue offers outstanding Quaker resources for congregations seeking to revive centuries-old spiritual disciplines made nearly extinct by our modern American political and cultural thinking. Reach them at:

Olsen, Charles M. *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders*, The Alban Institute, ©1995.

In many churches, board meetings differ little from their corporate-American counterparts. Even non-profit service agencies, while sharing many of the church's values, are not organized to be the Body of Christ in the world. For those of us longing for church structures that promote "salt and light," this book ventures into welcome territory.

6. The pastor takes seriously the complexity and uniqueness of the members of his/her congregation and explores ways to understand the impact of gender, generational differences, ethnicity, preferred learning styles, culture, season of life and personality type while cultivating congregational spirituality.

Hutchinson, Gloria. *Six Ways to Pray from Six Great Saints: Francis of Assisi, Clare of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, Therese of Lisieux, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross*. St. Anthony Messenger Press, ©1982.

Gloria Hutchinson begins with a simple compelling argument, "Although we have among our own ancestors great masters of prayer, we seldom approach them for advice. We are heirs who forget to claim our inheritance." She goes on to describe the unique gift each of six saints brings to the process of deepening prayer. Francis brings the prayer of praise, Clare's gift is praying the day, Ignatius offers sensual prayer, Therese brings selfless prayer, Teresa prays familiar words and John offers the prayer of detachment. Each chapter begins with a short portrait of the saint, moves into a description of his/her prayer style and then offers meditations and exercises allowing us to pray *along with* the Saint. This book, while expanding the possibilities for meaningful prayer, is also an excellent introduction to six faithful Christians each of whom left a unique mark on the history of the church.

Fischer, Kathleen. *Women at the Well: Feminist Perspectives on Spiritual Direction*, Paulist Press, ©1988.

Kathleen Fischer is described on the cover of this book as an experienced spiritual director, therapist and theologian. A mere reading of the introduction of this important book affirms the depth and breadth of her experience. Fischer not only challenges role definitions for men and women, she persuades the reader to think and see through the eyes of women's experience in the world. At the end of each chapter, she includes practical suggestions for individual and group reflection and prayer. This book should be required reading for anyone offering spiritual leadership and guidance but especially for men who wish to explore what may be missing in our perspective.

Ware, Corinne. *Discover Your Spiritual Type*, Alban Institute, ©1995.

In this book, Corinne Ware offers a helpful addition to the growing repertoire of writings dealing with the unique and sometimes rigid ways we each approach our spiritual life. Her insights can help you develop compassionate awareness for the variety of approaches represented in our congregations.

Fabella, Virginia. *Asian Christian Spirituality: Reclaiming Traditions*, Orbis Books, ©1992.

This book may be hard to find but is worth the search. Our congregations are well on their way to becoming microcosmic representations of American society. In many parts of the country Asian Americans make up the fastest growing segment of the population. Understanding the unique spiritual approach of this fascinating culture will challenge, inspire and reward you. Buy this book, read it, then pass it along to someone else who wants to expand their world and enlighten their soul.

Stewart III, Carlyle Fielding. *Soul Survivors: An African American Spirituality*, Westminster/John Knox, ©1997.

As pastor of the Hope United Methodist Church in Southfield, Michigan, Carlyle Stewart brings scholarship and years of weekly worship leadership and community activism to his writing. Many books have been written on the African American experience; this book focuses uniquely on African American spirituality. The premise popping up through each chapter is this: "The uniqueness of the African American paradigm of human freedom lies precisely in the way black Americans have used culture and spirituality as creative soul force in naming, defining, creating and transforming black existence. The efficacy of this paradigm of freedom lies in its capacity to encourage black people to develop a culture of spirituality and a spirituality of culture where the freedom to create is intimately bound to the freedom to be." While it is impossible for one person to speak for an entire culture, it is possible to shine a light from inside that culture that illuminates the hearts and minds of those standing on the outside. Carlyle Stewart's insights are a beacon.

Thurman, Howard. *Disciplines of the Spirit*, Friends United Press, ©1977

Howard Thurman died in 1981. He is widely recognized as a pre-eminent African American poet, mystic, philosopher and theologian. At the time of his death, he was Dean Emeritus of Marsh Chapel, Boston University. Throughout his career he authored more than twenty books on the spiritual life and served as a teacher and dean in a variety of well-known Colleges and Universities including Howard school of religion. Like many of his books, this one grew from Dr. Thurman's lectures. In the introduction, he describes the purpose of this writing as an examination of certain aspects of human experience. He chose these aspects for their universality and because of their "significance for tutoring the human spirit." The five he includes are these: commitment, growth, suffering, prayer and reconciliation. If you have not read Howard Thurman's books, this is a good one with which to begin. You'll want to read more. His mind and his spirit will become a trusted companion on your spiritual journey.

7. The pastor understands the value of long range planning and recognizes the spiritual life of the congregation as the central ingredient in healthy church growth.

Friend, Howard E. *Recovering the Sacred Center: Church Renewal from the Inside Out*. Judson Press, © 1998.

Howard Friend is a seasoned pastor and retreat leader. His commitment to personal sabbath and inner growth is evident. His book is a refreshing compliment to the many resources available dealing with church growth strategy. His call to the sacred center may or may not lead a congregation to be "seeker sensitive" but will ultimately lead people to spiritual transformation. In a world of trend watching and demographic analysis, this call to spiritual depth and authentic community resonates in the soul. Filled with personal experiences and dramatic stories, this book is part spiritual journal and part renewal manual. His practical ideas flow easily from his stories and analogies. Churches who accept the challenge of his conclusions and adapt his suggestions to their unique situations will be richly rewarded.

Easum, William M. and Thomas G. Bandy. *Growing Spiritual Redwoods*, Abington, ©1997.

Using the metaphor of the forest, Bandy and Easum describe healthy thriving churches as Spiritual Redwoods-organic, dynamic, relational, natural and big. This is a book about vitality in churches and is also, unashamedly, a church growth book. In the midst of encouraging bigness, a concept that may or may not speak to your soul, there is plenty of wisdom here for church leaders. As you read, the design of the pages make this book feel like “church growth for dummies.” One-liners are set apart in text boxes and practical suggestions abound. Phrases like “spirituality is more important than credentials” in the leadership chapter catches the eye immediately. This book is best taken in small doses. Because of the thematic nature of the chapters, reading sections in isolation is easy. Anyone with an eye to church growth and the future will find this book a worthwhile read.

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