

Principles for Spiritual Formation Resulting in Healthy Churches¹

By Bob Young

The development of healthy churches, both in the ministry setting of the US and in the mission setting of Latin America, depends largely on the development of effective methods of spiritual formation. One question that comes to me often is how to develop spiritually healthy churches. How does spiritual formation become a reality in a local church? The process of being formed in Christ (or Christ being formed in us) must be possible in the local community of believers.

Each year, I spend several months traveling among the churches, primarily in Latin America, but also in visits to various US churches. I am privileged to work with church leaders and to talk about those things that are necessary to move the churches forward. In a typical year, I visit six to eight countries to teach, preach, and present seminars in 20-30 locations. Each year, I am in touch with leaders from as many as 100 local congregations.

Each congregation has its own unique DNA and exists within a unique culture. There is no specific formula that always leads to spiritual formation and healthy churches. It is possible, however, to identify guiding principles that can set a general direction and to identify steps for implementation. Spiritual formation is a process that is unique in each community of believers.

My purpose in this article is to set forth some of the guiding principles that I have identified in my mission work, hoping to suggest a process that local churches can follow step by step. The value of setting forth these principles is twofold: first, it helps clarify what I have learned and what I have been doing for the past ten years in my mission work; second, it provides instructions for those who are striving to follow the same path.

Principle 1

Effective spiritual formation integrates personal formation, formation in the context of the faith community, and missional formation as one participates in God's eternal plan and purpose in this world. The next principles in the series will follow this basic developmental process.

These THREE ASPECTS of spiritual formation must not be isolated or pursued individually. They are organically connected. While faith is individual, it is nurtured in the context of the faith community and is practiced missionally. Personal spiritual formation must be intentional—intentionally putting oneself in a place to hear and learn from God while being spiritually aware. In addition, faith is nurtured and we are formed in the context of the community as we receive teaching and affirmation, correction and instruction. Finally, we become like Jesus as we join him in his mission on this earth. Participating in God's mission forms us spiritually. We must not think that only fully formed Christians can participate in God's mission.

¹ This article has been developed in part based on some of the principles set forth in the book, Andrews, Alan, ed. *The Kingdom Life: Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*. The first part of the book deals with process elements of spiritual formation: The Gospel of the Kingdom and Spiritual Formation, Communities of Grace, The Transformational Process, Spiritual Formation is Inside Out, Whole-Life Transformation, and Participating in God's Mission. The second part of the book deals with theological elements: Trinity as Foundation for Spiritual Development, Holy Spirit and Spiritual Formation, and Bible and Spiritual Formation.

In my teaching and preaching and seminars, I try always to bring these three aspects of spiritual formation together—personal responsibility, involvement in the community, and participation in the mission.

Principle 2

Spiritual formation demands that the central focus of the local church be on Jesus and his KINGDOM. Our world needs good news! We are called to be kingdom people! Every Christian is called to demonstrate God's presence in the world. Local churches where spiritual formation is encouraged and facilitated teach and preach consistently the presence of God in the lives of his people. God's presence enables our service, empowering us as we model kingdom living. Sadly, the kingdom is lacking in much of today's teaching and preaching. The King and his Kingdom must be proclaimed. The church goes forth into the world to advance the Kingdom by driving back darkness and bringing light.

I want to make sure that the message of the Kingdom is never out of sight in my teaching and preaching. The King reigns and we Christians are called to follow.

Principle 3

The church that is committed to spiritual formation will seek and save the lost, touching those who are most in need, those who are vulnerable, and the least. Spiritual formation cannot become a reality until people are brought to Jesus through the gospel. Spiritual formation is a meaningless concept outside of Christ. The easiest way to summarize this third principle is in the word EVANGELISM. The church is constantly seeking to grow its MEMBERSHIP numerically.

The church must be trained and motivated in sharing the gospel. Every Christian who wishes to grow and mature spiritually will participate in God's mission, according to her gifts. Every believer, and especially church leaders, will be vitally involved in the lives of those who have lost their way. The gospel is for those who are lost—those who are most receptive are often the poor, the infirm, the hurting, and the hopeless of our societies.

When one brings together the message of the Kingdom and the message of salvation to the lost, entrance into the Kingdom is simple, calling all to repentance, belief, and obedient discipleship. All may come; anyone may respond. All are welcomed! All must be sought. The message offers eternal life. All Christians, especially church leaders, are intentionally involved with those in need of the gospel, seeing the world through spiritual eyes that identify needs and reach out to the lost who are around us and cross our paths every day. The message of Jesus must be received as a first step toward spiritual formation.

I want always to train and encourage evangelism, giving to every Christian the resources, the skills, and the confidence to share the Gospel. The local church must always be focused on evangelism!

Principle 4

The church where spiritual formation is made easy focuses on maturing Christians in Christ. Spirituality is taught and preached. Spirituality is the expectation. Christ is to be developed in the life of every believer. Believers grow into a measure of the stature of Christ. This principle is summarized in the concept of DISCIPLESHIP, and in the word MATURITY.

Every believer is on a journey of following Jesus. Discipleship is personal, corporate, and missional. Discipleship must not be segmented or compartmentalized. Disciples are developed in personal time with God, group interactions, and engaging in the mission. The problem in many US churches, less so in most mission churches, is that our structures, expectations, and traditions are often hindrances.

Principle 5

The church that is serious about spiritual formation continually develops new kingdom leaders who will advance the gospel and the spiritual formation of the members. LEADERSHIP is a key. The kind of leaders the church needs are much different than those leaders who function well in the world. Kingdom leaders do not lead like the Gentiles, with authority and power. Kingdom leaders serve God; kingdom leaders serve God by serving God's people. Such leaders equip God's people for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:12). The primary focus of such leaders is on the spiritual health of God's people and the advancement of the gospel.

Developing kingdom leaders is essential to the development of a healthy church where people are spiritually formed and matured. The development of leaders has been a part of the mission work I am involved in from the beginning.

Principle 6

Spiritual formation is impossible unless people are equipped for ministry. Spiritual formation is not merely mental. Christians apply spiritual principles to their lives and serve others. Every Christian is a minister involved in MINISTRY. The early church grew because ordinary believers were constantly talking the Good News. The effective implementation of this principle depends on applying Principle 5 well. The key to the healthy church is sending more people out who will live spiritual lives that reflect the kingdom to bring others to Christ.

Principle 7

The spiritually healthy church is missional, duplicating itself, propagating itself, capable of reproduction. The MISSION of God is to bring everyone under the Lordship of Jesus. This occurs as more and more churches are planted—new churches that are capable of receiving and assimilating more believers. One problem in many places is that the churches that exist are full. This may be due to space limitations, interpersonal dynamics, closed friendship circles, or other factors. The fact is that “full” churches have a very difficult time receiving more people. Spiritual formation is missional, and people grow spiritually when they share in God's mission.