

Eídon

A Newsletter on Christian Spirituality for Church Leaders

January 2009

Nurturing New Christians

Spiritual Direction for Teenagers

Most congregations probably don't provide personal spiritual direction for new teenage Christians. But in this issue I'd like to describe the experience of one congregation that does.

The sheer size of baptism or confirmation classes in larger congregations makes it tempting for pastors to adopt something of a cookie-cutter approach: teach the youth what we want them to believe and know, get them baptized or confirmed, then turn them loose to figure out how to live as Christians. Once baptized or confirmed, they are on their own.

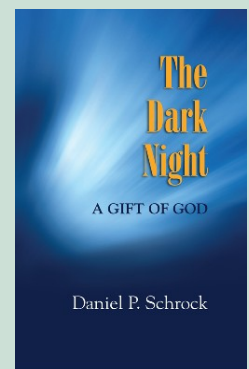
Of course this characterization is too simple (and a little unfair). All churches provide on-going spiritual formation through worship, youth groups, fellowship, and service. Yet precisely here could lie a weakness: as necessary as these group activities are, they may provide only general guidance for how a particular young person might meaningfully connect with God. By their very nature, group activities may not help a young person discover the individual spiritual pathways along which she or he can flourish in God's presence.

Even small congregations can fail to provide individual attention. I grew up in such a tiny congregation that when I wanted to be baptized, I was the only one in the class. In this one-on-one class, the pastor could have helped me to discover a little about my personality and the

Now Available

After some unexpected delays, *The Dark Night: A Gift of God*, has now been printed and is in stock at the publisher's warehouse. If you'd like to buy a copy directly from me at a somewhat reduced price (sales tax included, plus postage if I need to mail it to you), email me at dan@danschrock.org.

You can also order a copy directly from Herald Press by calling 1-800-245-7894 or by visiting <http://heraldpress.com>. They'll ship it to you immediately.



peculiar spiritual pathways that people with my makeup often find the most fruitful. But the poor man paid no attention to me as a uniquely-created person. He simply drilled the official teachings of the church into me—and tried, without success, to push me into a charismatic spirituality.

BAMF's Experience

At Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship where I presently serve, we offer each teenager a group baptism class plus one hour of individual spiritual direction. As in many congregations, the class teaches our denomination's confession of faith and introduces some basic spiritual practices.

Over the past 6 years, I've met with about 50 youth in one-on-one spiritual direction. Whereas in the early years I met each person before their baptism, I now meet them about 6 months afterward.

Because none of our youth have ever had spiritual direction, I take a more deliberate approach than I do with adults who are already familiar with the process of spiritual direction. To get a sense of who this unique young person is, I first ask open-ended questions about her or his personality, hobbies, and favorite subjects in school. Next I shift to questions about the person's present spiritual practices. How, when, and in what ways does he pray? Where does she sense most clearly the presence of God?

During these spiritual direction sessions, I've noticed 5 things about doing spiritual direction with youth.

First, personality makes a significant difference in how young people connect with God. For example, consider the difference between introversion and extroversion. Since most

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A Greek verb meaning to see or to perceive, frequently found in the New Testament

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Directing Young Christians (continued)

spiritual writers in Christian history were probably introverts, many of the church's historic spiritual practices suit introverts rather well. Yet by some estimates, 75% of North Americans are extroverts. Many youth clearly have an extroverted way of being and simply do not enjoy more introverted practices like journaling, silence, or solitude.

We could learn more about the spiritual lives of extraverts. Some work on this has been done, such as Nancy Reeves' recent book *Spirituality for Extroverts (And Tips for Those Who Love Them)*, but more research and reflection on how extroverts dance with God may be useful.

Second, many young people seem to pray best with their bodies in motion. Some years ago I felt lost while listening to one fellow because his spiritual make-up seemed so unfamiliar to me. Finally after a lull in the conversation he said, "You know, Dan, I take Silly Putty with me to school."

"Oh?" I responded.

"Yeah. I fiddle with it in my hands while I listen to the teachers. It helps me concentrate. I don't let them see it, of course, because they'd take it away. So I play with it under the desk where they can't see it, because my hands need something to do. Otherwise I can't pay attention very well."

I suddenly realized that his spirituality might require physical activity. Further listening revealed that he loved to recondition engines, fix broken objects, doodle, wrestle, and build things from Legos—all of which gave him a sense of peace and well-being. I therefore suggested that his personal relationship with God might best flourish if he prayed, meditated, and did other practices in

concert with some physical activity. I even told him he could bring his Silly Putty to worship and fiddle with it during my sermons!

Third, mental prayer is far more common among youth than verbal prayer. When I was a teenager, church leaders emphasized the importance of regular verbal prayer, spoken or whispered aloud to God. Yet in their personal, private praying, very few youth I meet with pray aloud. Instead they practice mental prayer—forming the words and ideas silently in their minds.

Some have even mastered the art of doing silent mental prayer on the fly during their daily activities, often with their eyes open.

The frequency of silent mental prayer strikes me as a bit odd because our congregation does not often model or discuss mental prayer. Most prayers in congregational life are verbal, whether in worship, fellowship activities, Christian education classes, or youth groups. Yet for whatever reasons, these youth prefer silent mental prayer. It makes me wonder what might happen if the church did more to teach and strengthen the practice of mental prayer. Might that be an important gift to youth?

Fourth, virtually all youth have developed various practices of meditation, but few have yet developed practices for contemplation. This is not surprising since the normal pattern for most people is to start with meditative practices and then later in life add contemplative practices. Perhaps only half a dozen of the youth I've met for

spiritual direction have displayed any contemplative inclinations at this point in their lives. I do believe, however, that many of them will incline more toward contemplative practices as they mature. (For more on meditation and contemplation, see the May 2008 issue of *Eidon*, available at <http://danschrock.org/newsletters.aspx>.)



Fifth, personal spiritual direction is a great way to help youth start off on the right foot, particularly if the session happens after baptism.

Doing spiritual direction 6-12 months after baptism seems more effective than doing it in the weeks leading up to baptism, when young people may still have a fairly idealistic view of what Christian living will be like. After youth have "seasoned" a wee bit for 6-12 months, spiritual direction can more readily address the realities of what faith is like day by day. The director can offer suggestions for navigating through some of the spiritual difficulties that may have arisen so far.

Not every congregation has a trained spiritual director who can work with newly baptized or confirmed Christian youth. Congregations without a spiritual director might consider hiring one from a neighboring congregation or from the community, preferably someone from the same denomination as your church. Since more spiritual directors are now available than in the past, more congregations can incorporate spiritual direction into the rhythm of church life.