

Two Essential Resources for Every Spiritual Leader in the 21st Century

© 2011 by Thomas R. Albin (Tom)¹

In order to be effective in our own Christian life and witness, as well as our spiritual leadership and service, I am convinced that ***every Christian leader needs a spiritual director and a prayer team***. I have found it to be true in my own experience for more than 30 years. I believe it will be true for you as well.

A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR OR GUIDE

Jesus called his disciples to follow him; he taught them to pray; he modeled the mission, and he gave them specific assignments to complete, followed by time together for conversation and reflection. As Jesus prepared the disciples for his departure, he promised them that the Holy Spirit would come to guide and empower their ministry enabling them to disciple future believers in the same way of life. After Jesus' death and resurrection, the book of Acts records the story of how Jesus kept this promise. The disciples, now apostles, guided and directed new believers in prayer, study, reflection, and mission. The new believers learned by means of teaching, practice, experience, mission, correction and reproof. Together, they went where Jesus went, did what Jesus did, and loved those who Jesus loved. The early church was a missionary church with two dimensions: love for God and love for neighbor. They were engaged in worship, prayer and praise. They were also engaged in evangelical witness and social justice.

From the time of the apostles to his present day, effective systems for Christian formation have included the biblical principle of spiritual direction or guidance, where those with more spiritual maturity and experienced help those with less knowledge and experienced in the Christian life. Unfortunately for most Protestants, the practice of Christian spiritual direction was lost in late 19th century rush for academic learning in the restricted context classroom lecture and discussion. The good news is, that in the last few decades of the 20th century, we began to recover the Christian tradition of spiritual direction and today it is a widely accepted practice.

My question is, "Do you have a spiritual director?" Is there someone you see on a regular basis (every 4 to 6 weeks) who is helping you grow in grace, learn new ways to pray, to experience God, and to care for your spiritual health? If not, would you benefit from time with someone who could help you on your spiritual journey? For everyone I know, the answer is yes.²

I am convinced that a Christian leader today needs a spiritual director who can help us grow in grace: someone who has more experience in the Christian life and willing to help us discern our own unique path and journey. Finding the right spiritual director is similar to finding the right doctor or counselor. There should be an initial consultation or two in order to get acquainted and to discuss the long term goals and expectations you have for your spiritual director. In the initial conversation, the spiritual director can also tell you about his/her hopes, expectations, processes and fee structure (if any).

¹ The information is extracted from a larger paper by the author. Permission is granted to copy and distribute this extract free of charge for use in Christian teaching, preaching or ministry settings.

²For an excellent discussion of this practice, see W. Paul Jones book, *The Art of Spiritual Direction*.

In some cases, you may continue with the same spiritual director indefinitely. In other cases, you or your spiritual director may discern that the time for your journey together has come to an end. It is not uncommon to have a different spiritual guide during different seasons of life.

A PRAYER TEAM

Jesus not only taught his disciples to pray but invited them to pray with him and for him. Within the 12 disciples, there was a special role for Peter, James and John. Most effective Christian leaders in the history of the church had an inner circle of people who prayed for him/her. In the early Methodist movement, John and Charles Wesley had a small group of spiritual intercessors that received special letters with their prayer requests along with the invitation to pray with them at a certain hour on Wednesdays and Fridays. Your prayer team does not need to be physically present to be spiritually effective.

Do you have a prayer team 3 to 5 people; or, a prayer group who know you well and you can trust to pray for you every time you lead a meeting or event, preach a sermon, or teach a lesson? I believe your ability to be an effective spiritual leader will be enhanced and strengthened by a small group of intercessors. In my experience, God will bring these people into your life and there will be an inexplicable spiritual connection. These people will never want your job or role. They want to see God working in and through you so that God's kingdom can come and God's will be done on earth, now.

One important thing I have learned from having a prayer team to support me in my ministry as a Christian leader is that ***Information is the oxygen a prayer team needs to pray effectively.*** Your prayer team needs information **before the event** and they need information **after the event**. It is your responsibility to give the prayer team a healthy environment; essential information or "oxygen", in order to provide you with spiritual support. In a sentence or two, tell them where you will be, what you are doing, and what you are praying for God to accomplish in and through this particular event, message, etc. The same is true after the event; tell them about one or two ways that you experienced God in the midst of the event; and tell them one or two things that you saw God do in others because of this event and their prayers. It does not have to be a great deal of detail and it should never involve information that is confidential. However, if you do not provide any information to your prayer team, there is no oxygen and they cannot pray effectively. If there is too little information, there is too little oxygen; and they will struggle to pray effectively.

The biblical passage that informs my understanding of an effective prayer team is Exodus 17:8-13. Israel was in a battle with the forces of Amalek. So long as Moses held up his staff, Israel prevailed. When he got weary and he could no longer hold up his hands, Amalek prevailed. It took Aaron and Hur to stand on either side of Moses, holding up his arms, in order for the forces of Israel to win battle.

The question is, do you have two or more people to hold up your arms? Are there people God has placed in your life or come to your mind who might respond positively to an invitation to join you in ministry through prayer? If not, would you be willing to ask God to bring these people across your path and point them out to you? Every Christian leader I know, lay or clergy, would benefit from a prayer team to lift up our arms when we are weary and give spiritual support to our ministry.