

The new old spirituality

Many ancient disciplines are energizing 21st century congregations

IMAGINE THIS SCENE. TEENS SILENTLY FORM A LINE in a hallway, patiently waiting late into the night to enter a room in which they will experience an ancient spiritual discipline: contemplative prayer. When they emerge from the prayer room an hour later, many have tears in their eyes, smiles on their faces and peace in their hearts. They have just walked a prayer labyrinth, an interactive 11-station experience in which the participants learn to practice the presence of Christ. Scenes like this are happening again and again in churches, camps and conferences all over North America.

Spirituality is “in” these days. Many people are searching for truth in new and unconventional ways. In the modern era (roughly the past 300 years) there was a move away from the spiritual toward the rational, the observable and the quantifiable. During the Reformation, Protestants “protested” the mysticism of the Catholic Church and favored a logical interpretation and presentation of scripture—thus the sermon was born. Today’s postmodern culture is increasingly distrustful of science, institutions and established religion. This post-boomer population is once again open to the mystery of the Holy Spirit and eager to understand God in ways other than the traditional sermon.

In a recent survey of 20-somethings, George Barna demonstrates that while 80 percent of 20 to 29-year-olds say faith is important and 60 percent report having a relationship with Christ, only 31 percent attend church weekly and only 30 percent make donations

to a church. The survey results reveal that America’s young adult population is deeply spiritual but highly disinterested in the modern church.

Biblical scholar and theologian Robert Weber makes a case for a return to an ancient spirituality including mystery, holism, community and spiritual disciplines in his important book *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*. Weber argues that ancient traditions must inform our contemporary church practices. He states, “Our challenge is not to reinvent Christianity but to restore and then adapt classical Christianity to the post-modern cultural situation.” Returning to ancient spiritual practices can help a new generation re-imagine the power of the gospel and re-engage with the church.

Many ancient disciplines are energizing congregations all over America. The list is far too long to review in this article, but two are worth mentioning.

■ Prayer labyrinth

The labyrinth dates back thousands of years and was adopted from Greek culture by Christians in the first centuries following Christ’s death as a tool for prayer. Labyrinths were also widely used in the great Gothic cathedrals of medieval Europe, the most famous being in Chartres, France. Laid out as a single path within concen-

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The God of Intimacy and Action: Reconnecting Ancient Spiritual Practices, Evangelism, and Justice, by Tony Campolo and Mary Darling (Jossey-Bass, 2007)

Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth, by Richard J. Foster (HarperOne, 1988)

Soul Shaper by Tony Jones (Zondervan, 2003)

Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus, by Mark Yaconelli (Zondervan, 2006)

Spiritual Disciplines Handbook, by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun (InterVarsity Press, 2005)

Weavings Journal: a Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life, published bimonthly
—Recommendations by Tim Neufeld



tric circles, participants wind their way from the outside into the center and then back out again.

The path represents the journey of life at three different levels. First the pilgrim moves toward the center through a variety of twists and turns symbolic of the journey toward God who exists at the center of all life. Next the traveler waits and prays at the center in communion with God. Finally the participant follows the maze out, representing a movement with God back into the world. This type of ancient symmetrical circular labyrinth has again become popular and can be found in modern churches throughout North America.

A recent adaptation of the original labyrinth has made use of technology, imagery and prayer stations. Known in the U.S. as the "Prayer Path," this labyrinth looks more like a traditional maze than a set of concentric circles. Through 11 interactive prayer stations participants relinquish distractions, confess their failures and admit their brokenness before God. At the center travelers rest on pillows, read from Scripture and celebrate communion. As they move outward, participants pray for those that are lost, remember the global community of faith and think about the witness they are leaving for others. Finally, participants journal about their time on the labyrinth. Many describe the experience of prayer and meditation as life changing.

■ "Divine reading"

Lectio divina is another ancient practice being used in churches. Simply translated from the Latin, it means "divine reading." Sometimes referred to as "dwelling in the word,"



Church incorporates prayer labyrinth into Holy Week

ShoreLife Community Church, in the coastal enclave of Capitola, Calif., is planning a prayer labyrinth this year in commemoration of Good Friday. Pastor Daniel Clubb, who with his wife, Valerie, came to the church from the East Bay area of California in November of 2005, says in a telephone interview that the church had a history of contemplative worship that predated their arrival. Introducing the prayer labyrinth provided a unique way to help reinforce the habit of prayer.

The first prayer labyrinth was introduced to the church in 2006 for the week leading up to Easter, including Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. According to Clubb, it was met with a positive response, especially from high school and college students.

Clubb feels that some people learn best when incorporating movement as well as the five senses and he sees the prayer labyrinth as incorporating and engaging both the mind and body as well as encouraging the discipline of prayer in an active way.

Prayer labyrinths most typically consist of concentric circles with multiple stations. "It is not a maze," says Clubb, "because it has both an entrance and an exit." The prayer labyrinth that ShoreLife Community has planned is rectangular in shape to follow the form of the worship center and will include nine stations.

At the entrance to the prayer labyrinth, says Clubb, there will be a sign that reads: "Welcome. As you participate in the prayer labyrinth, enter with a quiet and contemplative spirit." The first station will be Inward Journey, which encourages the participants to think about themselves and their relationship to and with God. The next five stations will be called Noise; Letting Go; Hurt; Distractions and Holy Space and represent the journey through this world, with God as the guide. The final three stations are entitled Outward Journey; Self and Others. These stations allow congregants to exit thinking about their relationship with other people.

The ShoreLife Community worship center will be open for the entire Friday afternoon and worshippers can come and go as they feel led.—Lori Belden Pope

lectio divina is a way of reading, praying and meditating on Scripture with the expectation that God is present and that he can be heard through the text. Maybe that is why it's called the Word of God! This devotional reading of Scripture can be traced back to the Desert Fathers and other early church leaders and was given special prominence by St. Benedict. To this day the Benedictine monks set aside time each day for labor, liturgy and *lectio*.

There are four basic steps involved in *lectio divina*. First is the *lectio* or "reading/listening." This stage cultivates the ability to listen deeply without distraction. The selected Scripture should be read more than once with the option of using different translations and a variety of readers, especially in a group. The listener is encouraged to identify any word or phrase that stands out or "shines." Even in familiar passages something new might catch the reader's attention. This is done in deliberate silence and with great patience.

Next is *meditatio* or "meditation." In this step the listener dwells on or "chews on" (reminiscent of a cow regurgitating its food) a specific word or phrase, asking for God's help in letting his Word become flesh. The third step is *oratio* or "prayer." While the whole exercise can be considered a prayer of Scripture, this segment emphasizes a prayer of contriteness. The listener prays that God will shape him or her through the text. The final stage is *contemplatio* or "contemplation." This is the silent response the reader has to God's magnificent presence. It is a time of resting in the midst of the Living Word.

The *lectio divina* is a discipline of silence, slow reading and careful attention to the voice of God. I have led *lectio divina* with teens, college students, church leaders and entire congregations. In a day when we are often encouraged to read the entire Bible in a year, it is a very profound and diligent way to not only read, but also to experience Scripture as a community.

Other ancient spiritual practices could also be discussed. Contemplative worship is growing in popularity among college stu-

dents and young adults, including silence, prayer, chants, antiphonal responses, etc. Taize worship, a contemplative form of worship based on the pattern of an ecumenical community in Taize, France, draws on all of the senses in quiet reflection. Even so-called contemporary services are engaging in some of these habits. Other reflective approaches include the Jesus Prayer, the *Ignatian Examen* and spiritual direction. Spiritual habits that are directed not toward silence but to an active response include fasting, journaling, Stations of the Cross, Sabbath and service.

Spiritual disciplines are meant to draw us into the presence of Christ. The ancient practices of the Christian church are not harsh duties to be performed with unquestioning rigor. Instead, they provide a means by which an intensely spiritual though distracted culture can find the source of that spirituality.

In his book, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, Mark Yaconelli says, "The contemplative tradition of the Christian faith comes to us as a precious gift in an age when no one has time to sit still. It comes as a medicine to a church culture obsessed with trends, efficiency, techniques and bullet-point results." Jesus calls his disciples to times of personal retreat. What would happen if we heard this call and practiced his presence in the midst of our busy lives?

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Definitions of seven old but new spiritual practices

Taize worship: A style of worship that comes from an ecumenical community in Taize, a little village in the south of Burgundy, France. Focusing on prayer, the two distinguishing marks of this form of worship are chants and silence.

The Jesus Prayer: Dating back to the fifth century, this prayer helps the believer focus on his or her place before Christ. Echoing the Kyrie the believer prays repetitively, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Stations of the Cross: Fourteen stations depict the arrest, suffering, crucifixion and burial of Jesus. The stations

can be found in many churches and cathedrals, as well as outdoors. Practiced especially during Lent, believers pray and reflect on Christ's work at each station.

Ignatian Examen: Short for "the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola," the exercises help the believer to examine and reflect on his or her life before God, usually during a 30-day group retreat.

Spiritual direction: Spiritual directors are trained to help Christians deepen their spirituality by drawing close to God, reflecting on life and seeking discernment. This is done through question-

ing, listening and practicing spiritual disciplines together.

Sabbath: Those who take seriously the discipline of keeping the Sabbath holy make it a habit to keep one day a week free of work. The goal is to engage in the things that draw the believer closer to God. Practicing the Sabbath can be very countercultural in today's busy world.

Service: Practicing spiritual disciplines ultimately leads Christians to serve others. Servanthood is foundational to the life of a believer and when practiced as a discipline becomes a powerful shaper of Christian life.—TN