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ANN Feature: Church, Congregations Increase Focus on "Spiritual Formation"

February 3, 2004 Silver Spring, Maryland, United States [Wendi Rogers/ANN]

Spiritual formation is a topic being raised by many pastors and church leaders in a growing number of Christian denominations. It's no longer enough to just know doctrine and facts--in today's hectic society people are searching for something deeper and more meaningful, something that makes sense in their whirlwind lives.

For the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a "wake-up call" was sounded after a 2002 survey showed that though doctrinal understanding was high, there were several "areas of concern," including low involvement in daily prayer and Bible study, active Christian witness to the community, and participation in community service (see ANN October 9, 2002).

These concerns can be linked to how the church rates in the area of spiritual formation, which has been defined by one Adventist Church pastor as "the process of becoming a mature Christian disciple of God." Another person describes it as "whatever you do to specifically nourish your relationship with God."

Today this subject is receiving serious emphasis in Adventist institutions, as well as in local congregations. Though the church doesn't have an accredited educational program dealing with spiritual formation at any of its theological schools, it's seeing this subject become more common in today's modern, seeking world.

Spiritual formation is not a new idea or concept, and "a lot of Protestants are in the same boat--we are rediscovering it," says Dr. Jon Dybdahl, president of Walla Walla College, an Adventist institution in Washington State. And, he adds, the Adventist Church has some work to do.

"Traditionally the Adventist Church has emphasized intellectual truth and accepting certain facts and ideas about God," Dybdahl says. "At least in



Jane Thayer.



Roger Dudley.

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many places it has not talked so much about the importance of directly experiencing God. The difference is between knowing about God and knowing God. Sometimes what we teach people is knowing about God ... That's part of the nature of things. It's much easier to communicate a fact than it is to wield people to experience."

[Pastor Martin Feldbush, associate director for Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries](#) whose work brings him in contact with leaders of several other denominations, says that the Adventist Church is not alone in its quest for deeper spiritual formation among members. "A lot of churches out there are struggling with the same issues as we are. We're not in isolation as though there's something wrong with us. I think churches particularly that are conservative in their orientation and take their mission very seriously, and I believe we should do all of that, may have a tendency to stress the 'doing' as opposed to the 'being' and the formation."

But why is there a need for spiritual formation? If people are part of a religious organization, shouldn't they already be at a certain level of spiritual formation?

[John Jenson, pastor of the 150-member South Bay Adventist Church in Torrance, California](#), says, "There's a need for spiritual formation with the [Adventist] Church because we have been so doctrinally oriented that people might be able to quote some or all of the 27 fundamental beliefs [of the church], and may have neglected having daily devotions that day or week or month." He explains that there's an overload of knowledge and information, but how to translate that into meaningful instruction and "marching orders" for daily living is key.

Jenson says that without spiritual formation, a person would be "spiritually uncivilized." It "is the process by which they can go from being a spiritual infant to spiritual maturity ... developing the potential that God's put within you."

[Dybdahl adds that people need to "Begin to recognize that knowledge without life experience can be dead. \[They need to\] recognize how crucial it is to people's lives \[and\] how much the younger generation values experience."](#)

[Dr. Jane Thayer, assistant professor of Religious Education and coordinator of the Religious Education Program at Andrews University](#), adds, "We have a big blank when it comes to taking care of people once they have accepted the Lord ... I think what people need to know is 'how do you live the life.' Spiritual formation or discipleship needs to show how you live like Christ."

[Nikolaus Satelmajer, from the church's Ministerial Association responsible for continuing education for Adventist clergy](#), believes there's now a shift from emphasis on doctrine to more emphasis on spiritual formation within the Adventist Church. He also says that, "We're finding a serious lack of knowledge of our people [church founders], our doctrines ... I think we have de-emphasized them." Satelmajer says this is true particularly with the younger generation, and the cause of any spiritual formation growth stunt is not because of a focus on doctrine.

Though it's not a concept that's easy to grasp for an organization as a whole, spiritual formation is something each individual member can work on, Feldbush says. "When you think about it as an individual, we're so used to gearing our spiritual experience on the 'wow' moments--the ones [in which] we can see the great things happening, whether it's personally or organizationally. It's easy to see God's movement in those times. Real spiritual formation is a process of growing more and more in tune to discernment of God's voice as well as more and more tuned to discernment of God's moving in my life, in the ordinary of life, as well as even in the difficult times of life. That's where real spiritual formation, or at least the value of spiritual formation, is seen."

Spiritual formation is not about what one does, but what the motivations behind one's actions are. [Dr. Roger Dudley, professor emeritus of Christian Ministry and director of the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University Theological Seminary](#), and the 2002 survey coordinator, says there are stages of moral development. "A person who studies the Bible every day because he'll be lost if he doesn't has a low level of moral development; or a person who pays tithes and offerings because he expects an extra blessing.

Higher levels would be a different level of motivation."

"That overemphasis on doing to the detriment of being and particularly the detriment of being in the spirit and being in Christ as the very formational and foundational experience of the individual member and the church itself, I think that's one of the big challenges," says Feldbush. He adds that the three strategic values of the church--unity, growth and quality of life--adopted in 2002, demonstrate personal spiritual growth.

Spiritual formation takes on several forms: "There are disciplines of devotion, [meditation](#), prayer, [listening](#) and so on," Feldbush explains. "[It's a discipline which can be heeded through the assistance of a person](#) who is trained in helping people grow in these ways." But, he says, it's mostly "growing more and more tuned to God's movement in my life here and now." And, he says, spiritual formation is not something that happens overnight.

"We [as a church] think that spiritual formation comes through socialization. But we need to be intentional about it," says Thayer. "The culture we live in is so pervasive that the models there are more persistent and prevalent than the little models we have just in terms of the time we've spent." Thayer refers to a need for showing others how to live like Christ in the real world.

Dudley adds that if more members are encouraged to study and pray more and are able and willing to share their faith, there may be spiritual development for the church as a whole. "Spiritual development is something that happens with individuals."

Satelmajer adds, "And within congregations as well. Spiritual formation is the implementation of spiritual principles in my life and in my actions," he says. "I think we're missing something. It's not just learning how to 'meditate'--spiritual formation is learning how to implement spiritual things that I know or am learning or experiencing into my life and then into my everyday life..."

[The Adventist world church created the International Board of Ministerial and Theological Education \(IBMTE\) in September 2001, designed to provide overall guidance and standards to the professional training of \[pastors, evangelists, theologians, teachers, chaplains and other denominational employees involved in ministerial and religious formation, or spiritual formation, in each of the church's 13 regions around the world.\]\(#\)](#)

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