

Beyond Teamwork: Spiritual Community at the Leadership Level

Ruth Haley Barton

“Christian community is founded solely on Jesus Christ and in fact, it already exists in Christ. It is not an ideal which we must realize, it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

It is much easier to talk about community—and even try to create community for others!—than it is to actually experience it at the leadership level. The truth is, most of us are not very good at maintaining our commitment to community when we get together to lead something. We find it more natural to resort to the subtleties of posturing and maneuvering and “working the system” when caught up in the dynamics of organizational or church life. When we experience disagreement, we are better at creating lines of division, voting each other off the island, or leaving each other, than we are at finding ways to come together in unity.

Sometimes we even lob lawsuits at each other, subjecting spiritual community to a secular court system that has little understanding of the values and commitments associated with Christian community—a move expressly forbidden in New Testament Scripture.

Spiritual community among leaders is challenging, at best, given the dynamics that inevitably come into play when very human people get together to lead. *The ability to transcend our most primal human instincts amid the challenge of leading with others does not happen by accident, nor is it a capacity that is maintained and cultivated in a haphazard way.* Cultivating community at the leadership level is a fully-orbed commitment that goes far beyond a perfunctory prayer at the beginning of a business meeting. It is led by leaders who are devoted to the values that undergird community and who are willing to live out these values in concrete and sometimes radical ways.

A Deeper Calling

Spiritual people who come together to lead churches and organizations with a Christian purpose have a deeper calling than mere teamwork: we are called to move *beyond* teamwork to spiritual community. We are called to allow our leadership to be grounded in, and to emerge from, our life together as a distinctly Christian community with distinctly Christian values and practices.

One of the fundamental differences between a team and a spiritual community is that a team gathers around a task, and when the task is over the team disbands. Spiritual community gathers around a Person—the person of Christ who is present to us through the Holy Spirit. We gather for the purpose of being transformed by the presence of Christ so that we can discern and do the will of God both personally and together.

We discover that spiritual transformation is *not* an end in itself but rather *leads to* the ability to discern and do the will of God (Romans 12:1, 2) and so a mission often emerges. But the mission *grows out of* our commitment to gather around the presence of Christ in life-transforming ways and to listen deeply for his direction in our lives. This is the essence of spiritual community as Jesus defines it. (Mark 3:34, 35)

The Transforming Center began years ago with a few leaders who gathered together on the basis of a shared desire to experience deeper levels of spiritual transformation in the context of our leadership. From the beginning, we committed ourselves to gathering in such a way that we were constantly opening ourselves to the presence of Christ by engaging in spiritual practices of prayer and study, self-examination and confession, rest and work, celebration and service to others. And we did indeed begin to sense God's calling to *do* something together, so we crafted a mission statement that captured our sense of calling to serve others in a particular way. We developed ministry offerings, and put structures in place to enable us to carry out our mission. All fledgling ministries do this kind of hard work.

However, it didn't take long for us to experience the stress and strain that all leadership groups experience when the mission (and what it takes to carry out the mission) threatens to overwhelm our life together as a community in Christ. We, too, have struggled with the temptation to allow the demands of

ministry to compromise our commitment to community. At times, we have made decisions too quickly and without enough time to listen fully to the wisdom of the whole community. We have made strategic plans and then struggled to keep up with the pace of life that our plans required. We have experienced the pain of missed opportunities for stopping to celebrate together what God was doing among us because we were rushing on to the next thing. At times we, too, have gotten so caught up with what we were doing for others that our personal and corporate disciplines suffered and the soul of our ministry started slipping away.

When Spiritual Community is at Its Best

Despite the challenges and our many failures along the way, we have learned a few things about what it is like for leaders to commit themselves to living and functioning as a spiritual community. We know what it is like to claw our way back to the most essential place when we have slipped from it. The journey always begins with a commitment (or a renewed commitment) to our hearts' deepest longings and convictions –to stay faithful to this great spiritual reality called Christian community and to see kingdom work emerge from that place. As imperfect as our attempts have been, we have learned that when spiritual community is at its best...

...we are finding ways to open to the presence of Christ in our midst. For us, this involves engaging in rhythms of prayer at regular intervals throughout the day when we are together. In Christian tradition, this way of praying is known as “fixed hour prayer”, “praying the hours” or “the daily office.” These prayers enable us to turn our hearts toward God in ways that are appropriate for whatever part of the day we are in. In the morning, we begin with praise, affirming God’s love for us and committing the work of the day to him. At mid-day, when tasks are pressing in and human effort is at its height, we stop to renew our awareness of God’s presence, to rest in him and to ask for his peace and guidance. In the evening, we place the cares of the day in God’s hands and make intercession for ourselves and others. If we are together on retreat, we close the day with night prayer, confessing our sins, celebrating God’s presence with us during the day and asking him to be with us as we rest. During these times, Scriptures is

read without comment, giving God the opportunity to address us directly through his Word. The Gospel readings in particular help us to stay connected to the person of Christ as the model for our life and work.

...we are attending to our relationships. We are taking time to listen to each other, care for each other with a word or a touch, and pray for each other whether we are together or apart. We are loving towards each other and affirming of one another's gifts and unique contributions to our shared work. When there is misunderstanding or hurt in a particular relationship, if there is hesitancy or resistance to a particular direction we are taking—we do our best to create time and space to pay attention. One of Jesus' specific accomplishments while on this earth was that "he loved his own until the end." Attending to relationships in this way takes time and attention, but if we fail at that, we have compromised the essence of Christian community and we have very little of value to offer to others.

...we are resting and retreating. Building time into our schedules to go on retreat, alone and together, has been challenging but it is also one of the most significant aspects of our life together. These retreats are not merely off-site planning meetings that require us to work longer than we would if we were back at the office. They are not conference-type events full of programming, noisy activity, and too much information. A spiritual retreat is a time apart when we move slower, take time to rest, have extended time for solitude and silent listening, share our journeys and key learnings, eat together and enjoy one another's company. When we fail to maintain these rhythms, we become tired and disconnected from ourselves, each other and God himself and then we are back to having compromised our deepest values.

...we are living within our limits. There is something deeply spiritual about honoring the limitations of our lives and the boundaries of what God has given us to do as leaders. Narcissistic leaders are always looking beyond their sphere of influence with visions of grandiosity far out of proportion to what is actually being given. Paul, great leader that he was, acknowledged that he had learned not to overstep his limits but to keep within the field that God had assigned to him. (II Corinthians 10:13)

The field that God has given us includes the body that we have, the personality that we have, the community of people that we work with, and the calling that we have been given. Living within our limits means living within the finiteness of who we are as individuals and as a community. The limits of

time and space. The limits of our physical, emotional, relational and spiritual capacities. The limits of our stage of life as an organization and the individuals who make up the organization. And the limits of the calling that God has given. It means doing this and not that. It means doing this much and not more.

To live within our limits is to live in humble acceptance of the fact that we are the creature and not the Creator. Only God is infinite; the rest of us need to be very clear about what we are called to and say no to everything else.

...we are moving forward in our work on the basis of discernment. One of the defining characteristics of spiritual community is a shared commitment to move forward on the basis of discernment rather than human planning and strategic maneuvering. Every time we have made decisions purely on the basis of strategic planning rather than entering first into a process of discernment, we have gotten out ahead of ourselves (and God!) and made mistakes. When we look at things strategically, it always makes sense to schedule more retreats, events, and initiatives, but this usually means we end up overcommitted. However, when we listen to what God is saying to us in the deeper places of our being, we usually find that less is more.

We are not opposed to strategic planning; in fact, that is an important *second* step. But discernment—listening deeply for God’s direction—must precede strategic planning. Then we are able to move confidently and with sure step towards our deepest calling, rather than falling into the frenetic pace that often develops when we just think our way into things.

Saying Yes to Spiritual Community

At the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry he called to himself “those whom he wanted,” the Scriptures tell us, inviting them first “to be with him” and then, secondarily to be sent out to minister with spiritual authority. (Mark 3) He did not choose a board or even a winning team to spearhead what would become a world-wide movement. He was convinced that *spiritual* results come from *spiritual* community.

Leaders need a safe place in community—like the community Jesus invited his disciples to be a part of—where we can receive guidance and support for attending to our own journey of spiritual

transformation. The only way for any church or ministry organization to become a community of transformation is to begin at the center: with the hearts and souls of the board, elders, and staff who are willing to lead together as a spiritual community. There is no short cut. That is why we have developed the *Transforming Community: A Two Year Experience of Spiritual Formation for Leaders*. It is designed to offer you as a Christian leader a place in community with other leaders who are also seeking to cultivate a uniquely spiritual approach to leadership.

Whatever is empty or lacking at the leadership center of your church or organization will eventually find its way out to the very edges. That's the bad news. The good news is that whatever is full and vibrant and true at the leadership center of your church or organization will find its way out to the edges as well. And it begins with you, the leader.

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