

Executive Summary: *Best Practices for Teaching Contemplative Disciplines in the Local Church as a Method for Spiritual Formation in Christlikeness.*

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This project arises from the growing realization that often the church's present discipleship methods are ineffective.

- They are not producing the evidence of Christlikeness in most believers.
- They are not allowing for faith transmission to subsequent generations.

This is abundantly evident in the continual revelation of moral and relational failure in the lives of church leaders and the growing trend of religious "nones" who claim no church or religious affiliation of any kind.

Three shifts are identified that have elevated the role of teaching in discipleship, primarily cognitive-based propositional models while minimizing the use of spiritual practices in the context of community with a focus on the experience of the presence of God:

- A growing secularity has left society with a loss of a sense of transcendence. Reality has become limited by what we can discern or apprehend with our physical senses and rational processes.¹
- The Enlightenment's rational turn has flattened philosophical anthropology concepts, using Descartes' "I think therefore I am" to define the whole of human nature. The overemphasis on reason has narrowed the understanding of human beings to the status of "thinking things."²
- This narrowing of the understanding of human nature has led to a stunted epistemology, which sees knowledge as facts, information and propositions while discounting other ways of knowing that are more relational, intuitive, and embodied.³

A return to the use of contemplative spiritual practices will help to counter this imbalance and allow for more transformative discipleship.

- A growing awareness of the continual presence of God with the believer engages the need for transcendence.
- Engaging the whole person - mind, emotions, body, and interpersonal relationships - in spiritual practices allows for transformation at all levels of the self.
- Moving beyond purely cognitive forms of spiritual formation embraces the full spectrum of epistemological possibilities.

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

² James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016).

³ Esther L. Meek, *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene, Ore: Cascade Books, 2011).

In researching seven churches across North America teaching contemplative disciplines with notable results in spiritual growth and maturity, the following practices were identified across the board, contributing to their success.

1. Authentic models in visible leadership.

Churches that teach contemplative practices well have leaders who authentically model what they are trying to communicate. Leaders are authentic and honest about their spiritual journeys, including transparent descriptions of the highs and lows of their walk with Jesus. They describe the practices they are engaged with as they seek to follow Jesus and lead others in these practices.

2. A focus on invitation over implementation.

Churches that teach contemplative practices well do so through creating a church ethos of invitation more than through developing church-wide programs. These churches consistently offer opportunities for growth in contemplative practice, but it is never assumed that everyone has to engage simultaneously and at the same level. The underlying and often unspoken assumption in all these churches is that everyone moves through this journey toward contemplative practice at a different pace.

3. Flexibility and discernment from church leadership.

Church leaders who teach contemplative practices well have learned to be flexible as they discern the best steps to take as a larger congregation. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, and there is no five-year plan for implementing a shift toward a more contemplative practice. The very nature of contemplation is attending to the presence of God with the believer. Therefore, it is necessary to make continual space for changes in direction and, consequently, in programming and focus. A phrase repeated multiple times in interviews with church leaders was that they were "figuring this out as we go."

4. A blending of opportunity for practice with intentional teaching.

Churches that teach contemplative practices well have realized that these practices are both "caught" and "taught." In churches with the most vibrant descriptions of personal change, there was a high blend of intentional teaching about disciplines with opportunities for guided practice and reflection on the discipline being taught.

5. A high value on contemplative practice in community.

Churches that teach contemplative practices well have learned that they are best taught and practiced within a community that provides both support and opportunity for reflection. In most churches, respondents linked their consistency and growth in contemplative practices with their connection to a smaller community around them.

6. An understanding of and appreciation for the importance of forms.

Churches that teach contemplative practices well understand and utilize the power of rhythms, structures, and liturgical forms. These reached far beyond liturgical forms in worship and included aspects embedded in the church calendar year after year, as well

as the choices made in the architecture and organization of the worship space within the church.

7. An acceptance of the need for time to bring about change.

Churches that teach contemplative practices well realize the slowness of the work of spiritual formation, which starkly contrasts the modern-day emphasis on speed and efficiency. Understandings at a deep transformative level are manufactured slowly over time. To do contemplative spiritual formation well, churches must accept the reality of small starts, often involving one-to-one teaching and mentoring, with slow growth.

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| 1. Authentic Models in Visible Leadership | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The Importance of Authenticity▪ The Need for Modeling▪ The Power of Visibility▪ Leadership is Critical |
| 2. Focus on Invitation over Implementation | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Invitation as Promotion▪ Invitation Involves Structure |
| 3. Flexibility and Discernment from Church Leadership | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Be Flexible▪ Be Creative |
| 4. Blending of Opportunity for Practice with Intentional Teaching | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Lack of Practice was a Catalyst▪ Emphasis on Teaching <i>AND</i> Practice▪ A Tendency to Teach Less Over Time |
| 5. High Value on Contemplative Practice in Community | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The Supportive Nature of Community▪ Lack of Success Without Community |
| 6. Understanding of and Appreciation for the Importance of Forms | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The Wide Variety of Forms▪ The Challenges of Online Formats▪ Intentional Use of Forms |
| 7. Acceptance of the Need for Time to Bring About Change | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Learning Takes Time▪ Small Starts, One-on-One▪ Slow is Good for Everyone▪ A Counter-Cultural Practice |

View the full project [HERE](#).

View the presentation [HERE](#).

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