

## A framework for spiritual growth

A pastor's perspective

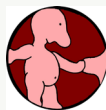
One of the biggest challenges a church can have is in measuring things. The things we measure are the things we value. Traditionally, churches have known how to measure their success by attendance, income from offerings, and buildings (Some of us call it the big B's – butts, bucks and buildings). However, this doesn't take into account the way that churches really grow. Some churches are very effective, but not many people are in attendance on Sunday (they're too busy making a difference in the community). Some churches have run-down buildings, but the warmth of the congregation still makes church welcoming. Some churches make up for the lack of dollars with volunteer hours and ingenuity.

The most challenging thing about following Jesus is that, by the standards of the three B's, his ministry wasn't much of a success. He had no place to lay his head, let alone a building project. He consistently turned people away and lost followers because of his offensive teachings. He associated with the poor, and encouraged people to give away all their stuff. If our priority is following Jesus, then there's got to be a different way of thinking about our spiritual health.

So how does one register what is underneath? And what are the resources to be spiritually healthy?

I found that Foster's *Streams of Living Water* and the Spiritual Formation series gave me both a compass and a resource. Instead of saying that one model of church is the ultimate, Foster looks at the strengths and weaknesses of several different ways of being church. I call them the Way of:

The Spirit



Charismatic tradition

The Everyday



Sacramental or Incarnational Tradition

Learning & Understanding



Evangelical Tradition

Justice



Social Justice Tradition

Contemplation



Contemplative Tradition

Holiness



Holiness Tradition

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Everyone will have a favourite, comfortable couple of “ways”. You might love quiet prayer and listening to the Holy Spirit. You might be able to find God over a cup of coffee, and serve Christ in serving the poor. You might be always hungry for the Word of God and be striving to develop character that is more like God and less like the world. The great thing about these ways is that no one is “the best”, but all of them speak to each other and help us grow. If you're looking for a way to grow in your faith, investigating a less familiar “way” might be the next step.

The church traditions that best practice the “ways” are a valuable resource and sometimes good critique for us in our spiritual journeys. It may be helpful for someone who is struggling with their life of prayer to borrow writings from the contemplative tradition. Someone who has become insular in their vision may benefit from spending time with those who serve in the social justice tradition. A person who struggles to read the Bible could get some techniques from the evangelical tradition.

My church has adopted these Ways as our compass and resource. Our small groups did the Spiritual Formation Workbook; there were some articles to read; there were activities for children and families; and there were exercises that everyone could try. What we found was an opening up to God's Spirit, a challenge about our habits that trip us up in following Jesus in really ordinary ways, and some guidance about our next steps.

### A warning:

Some people found this very simple. It is. Following Jesus is really simple – but it's also hard and none of us can claim to have it down pat. It's not *simplistic*. Richard Foster sits in a school of thought that emphasizes the *practice* of being a Christian, not the theory. (If you want a really in-depth look at history and theory, read *Streams of Living Water*.) Much of this is not new, but it is revolutionary. If people are saying “it's too simple”, then you can be sure that they are not taking the exercises seriously. Working out in a gym to get fit is pretty simple – but it's in the consistency of doing it, and making the effort, that makes the workout worthwhile.

