

Women's Group: Spiritual Formation Guidelines

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Introduction

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun proposes, “From the beginning the church linked the desire for more of God to intentional practices, relationships, and experiences that gave people space in their lives to “keep company” with Jesus. These practices, relationships, and experiences are known as “Spiritual Disciplines”.¹ In compliance with this supposition the writer will provide contemporary factors that will engage the utilization of spiritual disciplines that are beneficial to specific ministry participants who need guidance, direction, and connect more with God. Although there are many facets of spiritual disciplines that can be discussed the writer will focus on a specific context that will assist individuals of the women’s group to grow and address the challenges of the 21st century. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how identifiable spiritual disciplines can be applied to help women gain momentum in their relationship with God while interacting with others. In conjunction, with this prospective the writer will also consider particular spiritual disciplines that spark controversy within certain parameters of opening oneself to God.

Challenges of the 21st Century

To assess what spiritual practices are best suited for a women’s group the writer will first address the issues that are prevalent in the 21st century. Stephen Strang indicates, “The church has grappled with many issues in the last 20 years. What are the most crucial issues facing us now? The most crucial issues are”:²

1. **Racism:** This is America’s number issue.

1 Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015),19

2 Stephen Strang, “Twenty Issues Facing The Church,” *Ministry Today*, 12/31/2002. accessed December 7, 2017, <https://ministrytodaymag.com/index.php/ministry-today-archives/126-from-the-publisher/6981-twenty-issues-facing-the-church>.

2. **Righteous Living:** Sin in the church is not new, but it seems among some Charismatics there is a new lax attitude toward high-profile ministers who preach one thing and live another.
3. **Right Doctrine:** Meanwhile, loose lifestyles and arrogance among leaders often lead to a new definition of sin. If no one is going to hell, it doesn't matter how you live.
4. **Prophetic Leadership:** Some so-called prophets are said to sell prophecies for various-size donations.
5. **Sound Teaching:** We need teachers who will help those who want to be disciples to understand what it means to follow Christ, and in the process will help us avoid false doctrine.
6. **Progressive Evangelists:** New evangelists are needed to reach a new generation, many whom are from dysfunctional homes and question the theology many churches embrace.
7. **Abusive Pastors:** We need pastors who will really pastor and not abuse their sheep.
8. **Cultural Influence:** It seems the media and academic communities have marginalized the church as to consider it irrelevant.
9. **Social Justice:** There is a need for social justice for many who are denied opportunities in this land of plenty. The Bible bids us to respond to their plight.
10. **Discipling Men:** Many of the ills in our society can be traced to the fact too many men have abandoned their roles as leaders and providers in the home, leaving a generation of fatherless children.
11. **Pride:** More than any other sin, God hates pride. Yet the sin most common in the church is sin.³

Vern L. Bengston, Norella M. Putney, and Susan Harris affirm, "Congregations today face significant adaptive challenges as they seek to be faith forming communities for people today. Among these are four, interconnected and significant adaptive challenges that will have an enduring impact on congregations and faith formation:

1. The increasing diversity throughout American society in the length of the life-span, in generational identities, in family structures and marriage patterns, and in the ethnic makeup of America
2. The rise of new digital technologies that are reshaping society and the emergence of a connected, networked society
3. The dramatic changes and increasing diversity in the religious beliefs, practices, and affiliation of Americans
4. The decline in religious transmission from generation to generation⁴

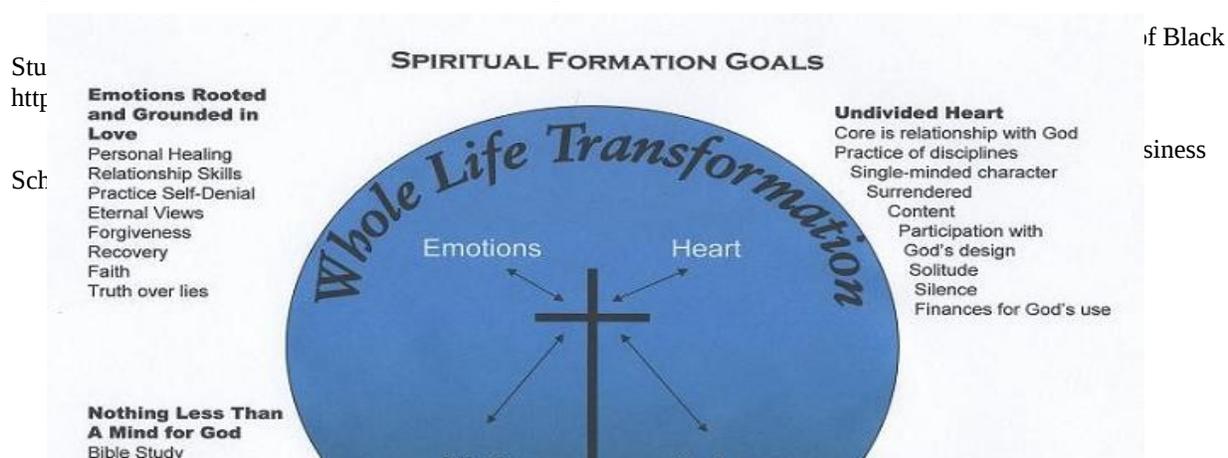
³ Strang, 2.

The writer does not want to appear to be biased concerning further issues African-American women face but is inclined to present the actualities. Joyce A. Ladner stipulates, “From an historical perspective, black women have experienced major continuity in their roles within the social structure, albeit often with negative consequences. However, the past twenty years have brought about vast changes in the lives of U.S women”.⁵ Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli proposes, “Raising children and having a career are hard work. Many women worry that success in the workplace comes at the expense of family life”.⁶ Taking into consideration the afore-mentioned challenges women are entering women’s groups encumbered with issues that hinder their progress in substantial ways. Therefore, it is imperative that women learn how to navigate through the myriads of 21st century challenges to find significant ways to stay the course of growing stronger emotionally, psychologically, and most of all, spiritually.

Women’s Group Initiatives

In the midst, of these emergent trends women’s groups are confronting the challenges by incorporating spiritual disciplines that are designed to help women understand their value in God, uphold holy lifestyles, and seek collective ways to help others open themselves up to God. Spiritual Disciplines are not to be considered as cure all methods but can be used as starting points to open dialogue with God and gain insights into the vast potential he has placed within each of them.⁷ Hence, when new participants join women’s groups it is important to assess their needs on

4 Vern L. Bengtson, Norella M. Putney, and Susan Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down Across Generations* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 25, accessed December 7, 2017, <http://www.21stcenturyfaithformation.com/challenges.html>.



a personal level and collectively. The writer submits it would be appropriate to incorporate a goals questionnaire for each participant to fill out. In return this will give the women's group facilitators insights into what spiritual disciplines will be conducive for reaching the intended goals stated by the participant or participants. Calhoun states, "Remember the discipline you are being called to needs to fit with your life now. It must work within the givens of your human limits".⁸ The chart below gives detailed information on the type of data that can be compiled from questionnaires to enable women's groups to address the anticipated goals.

West, D. K. <http://www.make-my-christian-life-work.com/spiritualformation.html>⁹

Transforming Spiritual Disciplines

Coupled with 21st century challenges and meeting specific women needs the writer suggests prayer, silence, sabbath, mediating, solidarity, small group, and compassion as feasible disciplines that can be integrated into women's groups. Since everything is birthed through a strong prayer life the writer advises this discipline should be an ongoing practice. Calhoun states, "The P disciplines provide a number of ways of entering into prayer. The inward posture of the heart preceded all outward postures for prayer".¹⁰ Recognizing this principle women's groups should encourage participants to keep prayer high on their list of priorities. Due to past and present circumstances many women are experiences brokenness, rejection, and lack of self-esteem, hence, the practice of inner healing and contemplative prayer should bring about deliverance and spiritual growth. Calhoun writes, "Inner-healing prayer focuses attention on

⁸ Calhoun, 23.

⁹ West, D. K. <http://www.make-my-christian-life-work.com/spiritualformation.html> (West, 2017).

¹⁰ Calhoun, 231.

emotional wounds, needs, lies, vows, and dysfunctions. Inner healing wounds can be painful that we can't name them or face them alone".¹¹ Being active participants in women's groups will help women push pass the pain to gain freedom from past hurts and other dysfunctions. Nouwen points out, "Contemplation prayer cleanses the mind and opens the heart to receive God's truth, beauty, and wisdom. The illusions of life are unmasked, and true vision is possible". Darkness is dispelled, and divine light shines through".¹²

The adage, "Speech is Silver, Silence is Golden" speaks volume to the following spiritual discipline countless women need to strongly adhere to.¹³ As a result, of their busy schedules numerous women fail to set aside quality time alone with God to savor the silence. Calhoun explains, "Silence is the regenerative practice of attending and listening to God in quiet, without interruption and noise". Practicing silence helps to produce the God-given fruit of freedom from negative habits of speech, impulsive chatter, small talk, and impression management".¹⁴ Taking the time to be silent can lead into a Sabbath day of rest that will help women reconnect with God, focus on his promises, and gain wisdom that is difficult to be garnered on the run. Nouwen acknowledges, "Somewhere we know that without silence, words lose their meaning; that without listening, speaking no longer heals; that without distance, closeness cannot cure. Somewhere we know that without a solitary place, our actions quickly become empty gestures".¹⁵ In other words, without taking time to be silent in God's presence eventually one can slump into an apathetic mindset just going through the motions.

11 Ibid., 255.

12 Henry Nouwen, Michael J. Christensen, and Rebecca J. Laird, *Spiritual Formation: Following The Movements of The Spirit* (New York, New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2010), 13.

13 Thomas Carlyle, "TOP 25 SILENCE IS GOLDEN QUOTES (of 51) | A-Z Quotes," A-Z Quotes, <http://www.azquotes.com/quotes/topics/silence-is-golden.html>.

14 Calhoun, 121.

15 Nouwen, 21.

Meditation is a viable practice that help women refocus their attention on what is important, helps to reset priorities, and bring calmness to an erratic soul. Meditating on the Word of God helps women to stop, “mull over, chew on, and ruminate” over his word to get clarity on its historical meaning, how it applies to their lives and others, and what God expects from his people.¹⁶

Participating in small or covenant groups are excellent ways to grow into a well-rounded person despite the outward issues that try to deter emotional and spiritual growth. Calhoun explains, “Sharing your story and your authentic self with a small group who listens with you for God’s word for your life will help women to merge into community rather than emerging into independence”.¹⁷ Being a part of women groups that reinforce change will shed light on the real issues that can be alleviated through openness, honesty, and a willingness to accept truth. Taking action steps to apply the needed changes women activate open avenues where compassion for others can thrive. Calhoun remarks, “Compassion means feeling with and for others as well as extending mercy and help to them in extravagantly practical ways. Compassion is part and parcel sharing in God’s heart for an aching and wounded world”.¹⁸ When women experience freedom in God from their aching hearts they become better equip to share that same compassion with others.

Spiritual Disciplines: Heal or Hurt

To solidify the research the writer must observe both sides of the spectrum concerning whether spiritual disciplines when used in the proper context can bring about results that foster change or hinder progress. Opponents of certain spiritual disciplines warn some of the practices

16 Ibid., 191.

17 Ibid., 152.

18 Calhoun, 205.

recommended by Spiritual Formation proponents can cause more harm than good.¹⁹ Considering, the extensive research that continues to be presented the writer concurs with this supposition. Consequently, the writer does not recommend women's groups to utilize the practices of iconography, lectio divina, labyrinth prayer, and centering prayer due to their proximity of opening doors to delving into occultism or mystical practices. For example, Calhoun suggests in her method of centering prayer:²⁰

Imagine the current. river of the of Christ with	Imagine that God's river of life runs through you. Deep down, the river is calm and slow. But on the surface there is rushing and debris. your distracting thoughts are part of the debris floating in Don't try to capture these thoughts; release them and let the God's life carry them away. Anytime you are distracted, let distractions go with the river. Gently return to the presence your prayer word.
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This practice in and of itself cautions the writer to question whether this could be a pathway into using God's word to foster a mantra. According to Collins Dictionary, "a mantra is a word or phrase repeated by Buddhists and Hindus when they meditate, or to help them feel calm".²¹ If this speculation holds true the writer recommends that women groups or any Christian should not indulge in this practice. Labyrinth prayer has its questionable aspects solely in the idea of using a small or large circular or rectangular object to map out your prayer pilgrimage with God. In some ways a labyrinth can be compared to a maze as one travels for the outside of the object into the inner core supposedly to meet God.²² The writer warns there are several red flag warnings against this practice since it is intended to create a prayer path for the participate. It

¹⁹ John Witcombe, "*Lectio Divina*," <http://amazingdiscoveries.org>, March 12, 2010, accessed December 8, 2017, http://amazingdiscoveries.org/S-deception_lectio-divina_Bible_meditation.

²⁰ Ibid., 237.

²¹ "Mantra", Collins Dictionary, 2017, accessed December 5, 2017, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/mantra>.

²² Calhoun, 264.

is the writer's conviction that individuals do not need an outward prayer path to reach the True and Living God. If they have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior the Holy Spirit resides within and gives them the ability to connect with our Heavenly Father through pray unceasingly. (Romans 8:26)

Conclusion

After reviewing the varying dynamics of spiritual disciplines, the writer has concluded as with any endeavor there are pros and cons that constitutes the validity of its value. Women are facing surmountable challenges in the 21st century, for that reason, precise spiritual disciplines are geared to address issues that are pertinent to women. The research has shown that prayer, silence, sabbath, meditating on the Word of God, participating in small and covenant groups, establishing community, and showing compassion to others are substantial disciplines that if practiced on a continuous basis will not only impact this generation of women but the generations to come.

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