

HEART-TO-HEART

May 2006

A Pastoral Letter from Richard Foster



Dear Friends,

A year ago (Heart-to-Heart, May 2005) I wrote, “I long to see the gathering together of multiplied numbers of ‘spiritual formation based congregations’ throughout the US and beyond.” In this pastoral letter I want to think with you about what it might take to see the emergence of **spiritual formation based congregations**. This is no small issue for the pitfalls and challenges are many.

First, however, it is essential that we all have in mind the characteristics of a spiritual formation based congregation, as best as we can ascertain. In these fellowships:

- the process of Christian spiritual formation and life-long discipleship is the foundation of individual and congregational life;
- everyone is encouraged to be involved in an intentional process for formation in Christlikeness;
- the natural outcome of events for individual participation in the fellowship is ever-increasing formation and transformation into the ways and heart of Jesus;
- spiritual formation in Christlikeness is a process not a program;
- pastors and lay leadership are fully committed to and participating in the spiritual formation process;
- there is a great diversity of sources to draw from for Christian faith and practice;
- the classical Spiritual Disciplines—such as prayer, fasting, service, and guidance—are highly valued, taught on, and practiced; and
- all are encouraged to explore the writings of the great devotional authors of the Church, such as Saint Augustine, Julian of Norwich, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

While certainly not an all-inclusive listing of characteristics for a spiritual formation based congregation, churches that shape their common life in relation with the above are well on their way.

Now, I want to work with you on several key “principles” for spiritual formation based congregations. Then let’s think together about “plans” for moving forward. Finally, let’s consider “practices” for this glorious life in the kingdom of God. (Contrary to my own fierce opposition to acronyms and alliterations I have actually come up with three P’s: principles, plans, and practices!)

Sharpening the Principles

I have three things to say in the “principles” category. The first thing you already know, but it bears reemphasizing and repeating and reiterating over and over again. It is this: **God alone is the One who creates and grows spiritual formation based congregations**. Christian community of this nature is not a human attainment but a gift of God. We don’t create it nor make it happen. In *Life Together* Dietrich Bonhoeffer wisely notes that Christian community “is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.”

This means that all of our efforts toward spiritual formation based communities must be subservient to a greater Reality. If our plans and schemes and programs are not firmly rooted in the great Reality—God and life in his kingdom—then they will blow away like dust. Even in our evangelistic efforts God is the great Initiator and Creator. Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase (1 Cor. 3:6). The stress of Scripture is always on God’s inscrutable sovereignty in all things.

Right here, though, we have some great, good news: God is deeply committed to the formation of Christian community. “The aim of God in history,” we write in *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible*, “is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons with God himself at the very center of this community as its prime Sustainer and most glorious Inhabitant.” Christ *will* grow his Church; we can be assured of that. And we are welcomed to be his co-laborers in this process of the birth and growth of spiritual formation based congregations.

My second point is simple enough to say though exceedingly difficult to practice: **Spiritual problems demand spiritual answers.** We simply can never solve a spiritual problem with a programmatic answer. It is vital in any congregational setting to be working with God on the spiritual nature of the community. Is pride pervasive throughout? Then spiritual disciplines of Service are called for. Is nervous, anxious over commitment evident everywhere? Then disciplines of Solitude and Silence can help. Is there a lack of trust in God? Then experiences of Prayer and Fasting are needed. Are we taking ourselves too seriously? Then multiplied opportunities for Celebration need to break forth!

Times come in the life of any congregation that in order for us to be attentive to God we have to become firmly anti-programmatic; that is, we learn to stop doing things. At such times we are to discover ways, as a people together, to follow the counsel of François Fénelon, “Be silent, and listen to God. Let your heart be in such a state of preparation that his Spirit may impress upon you such virtues as will please him. Let all within you listen to him. This silence of all outward and earthly affection and of human thoughts within us is essential if we are to hear his voice.”

My third principle is really a warning: **We must never use spiritual formation efforts to shore up a dying institutional structure.** This problem can be quickly identified whenever the spiritual disciplines are being used to increase attendance at worship services or to enhance the offerings or to get people to serve on committees or to boost evangelistic efforts. Christopher Dawson has written, “The spirit of the Gospel . . . is essentially hostile to the spirit of calculation, the spirit of worldly prudence and above all to the spirit of religious self-seeking and self-satisfaction.”

Our focus can never be institutional survival. Rather, it is precious people. Some structures help us in this focus upon people and when this is the case, we can thank God for the structure. Other structures hinder, and when this is the case, too bad for the structure. Frankly, friends, structures come and go. The great glory of human beings is that they are created in the image of God and are unceasing beings with an eternal destiny in God’s great universe. Hence, they are the heart and center of our spiritual formation efforts. Always.

Considering the Plans

It is time for us to consider the plans necessary for the emerging of spiritual formation based congregations. While it may be true that we can devise plans without God, it is most certainly true that if we do not make plans it will be without God. Planning is a vital part of our God-given task in co-operating with God in this work. As with the principles so with the plans I have three things I want to say.

First: **All one-size-fits-all plans are doomed to failure.** Just as every person is unique so every congregation has its own DNA, if you will. A congregation needs deep reflection and hands-on training and experiential learning that is unique to her alone. Thinking through what this should look like has historically been the role of the pastor in the cure of souls. This involves intimate knowledge of a congregation; her history and social dynamics and family life and spiritual heritage and so much more. Knowing the people of a congregation by name and by fears and by hopes and by dreams and by failures and by successes is central to the work of spiritual direction. This is the shepherd role of the pastor.

This is why RENOVARÉ has been reticent over the years to develop curriculum *ad nauseum*. Such things really shouldn't be developed in a vacuum. No, if congregations are seeking renewal they are best encouraged to enter an intentional process of self-understanding and self-assessment and Spirit-led planning to discern its own unique character and needs.

Second: **We help best by providing a large menu of resources that are able to cast a vision for Life in the kingdom of God.** And so we teach and illustrate and live out this wonderful *zōē* Life that flows through nearly every page of our Bibles. We connect congregations with the great march of the people of God throughout history. We allow the ancients to tell their story in their history and context, and then we do what we can to provide a bridge from then to now for contemporary congregations.

Third: **Under God we work out the plans that speak to the condition of our people, of our congregation.** One pastor wrote (no doubt frustrated with the many "one-size-fits-all" plans out there for spiritual renewal) saying, "I am wondering if the time has come to design my own program for my own local church." Yes. Exactly. This is precisely what we all need to do. This is an essential part of the work of the cure of souls. There simply is no other way.

So I encourage you, dear pastor.¹ This *is* the work that you have been given. This *is* what it means to shepherd the people of God. Spiritual formation always has a local address. God is asking you to discern the experiences necessary for your congregation's one-of-a-kind social environment. There is no program out there that will bring to pass the kind of renewal that Jesus has in mind for your people. Perhaps groups like RENOVARÉ can provide certain resources for your efforts, but, by their very nature, they are only rough sketches and illustrations. The plans are yours to make.

Entering Various Practices

As for practices, even though rough sketches and illustrations are the best we can do, these can sometimes be enormously helpful. So I here share with you a couple stories that just may spark ideas in your own heart and mind.

The first story is of a congregation healthy in many ways and with innumerable strengths. One glaring need, however, was our growing inability to see God active and working in our midst. We had grown cold and perfunctory, and we needed the active life of God, real and immediate among us. In speaking to this need we arranged for some special meetings led by a pastor with a special gifting in healing prayer. This pastor was from a relatively high liturgical background and we felt that teaching on healing prayer from this direction could be better received by our Quaker congregation than from, say, a pentecostal direction.

In preparation for this experience we decided to use the spiritual discipline of fasting, and to use it in three ways. First, we had a one day congregation-wide fast. We gathered the next Sunday night to share what we had learned. As far as I could discern this experience was an overwhelming failure. The most frequent comment had to do with the headaches brought on by caffeine withdrawal!

Second, I invited our Elders to join me for an experience of fasting each Monday for six weeks. We then gathered at the Sanctuary altar Monday evening to share our experiences. This was more satisfying as different ones shared significant growth and insight. We then would close the evening with extended prayer for our people and their heart growth in grace.

The third experience was a seven day fast I undertook myself in preparation for these meetings. A good friend, a bus driver, joined me in the experience. On the last day of the fast I walked around our church property seven times. No, I didn't blow any trumpets, but as I walked I did experience a

¹ I certainly do not want to leave out Elders and other leaders responsible for the spiritual life of the congregation.

great release of prayer for our people, feeling like I had been enabled just a little to enter into the spirit of the people, to use the language of John Woolman. That evening I met with my bus driver friend to break our little fast. He had maintained a detailed journal record of the seven days and we were both moved greatly by the insights contained in those notations.

Can I say to you that those meetings were a dramatic turning point for many of us, and for us as a congregation. Those days were surrounded by the depths of tender love. I know I shall never be the same.

Briefly, a second story. This concerns a young congregation, small but vibrant. Our problem, however, involved numerous young Christians from seriously dysfunctional backgrounds and desperately needing a moral anchor in their lives. Again, a spiritual problem demands a spiritual answer. We responded to this need by providing extensive teaching on many ethical passages in the Bible, most intensively from the Sermon on the Mount. Our friend Dallas Willard was with us in that small congregation. I canceled all adult classes so that we could all attend to Dallas's teaching on the Sermon on the Mount. He taught for weeks on end—much of that teaching is now in *The Divine Conspiracy*. Many in that small fellowship studied for ten, sometimes fifteen hours just to prepare for the next teaching session.

It is not too much to say that those teachings formed us in ways that still impact us to this day, some thirty years later.

You get the idea I am sure. Informed by the principles we begin to think through the plans that are unique to our setting and then enter into the practices that will form us and our people into the likeness of Christ.

Peace and joy,



Richard J. Foster

Registration deadline extended to July 1, 2006

Please Join Us for the
Second Bi-Annual
RENOVARÉ
Covenant Retreat

July 16-20, 2006
Snow Mountain Ranch Center
Winter Park, Colorado

**Solitude and the
Way of the Heart**
Mark 1:35-37

Featuring



**Richard J. Foster • Roy Searle
Gayle-Anne Drury • Jeff and Jill Sutheran
& The RENOVARÉ Ministry Team**

I am quite pleased Roy, Gayle-Anne, Jeff, and Jill of the Northumbria Community will be with us, for sharing from their Celtic Christian perspective and for helping us better understand the blessings and challenges for RENOVARÉ in the substantially secularized Great Britain and Ireland context.

Please join us. — Richard J. Foster

For More Information

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May 2006



Dear Friend,

Did you know that if every household that receives this letter were to respond with a \$10 donation, that the RENOVARÉ US budget would be covered for 2006?

Did you know that if every household that receives this letter were to respond with a \$20 donation, that both the RENOVARÉ US budget would be covered *and* that we would have extra funds, say, to support RENOVARÉ work in other countries?

If you have given to RENOVARÉ in the past, I hope you will give again. If you have never given a donation to RENOVARÉ, I hope you will sit down right now and write a check or give on-line.

As I have done for over 15 years of fund-raising for RENOVARÉ, let me be as honest about our present situation as I possibly can. **Frankly, it has rarely been better.** *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible* sales are meeting expectations. Two products related to this Bible will soon be released. Later this month, RENOVARÉ is partnering with the Spiritual Formation Forum to bring about a significant event. Our 2nd Bi-Annual Covenant Retreat (July 16-20) is on-track to be a helpful experience for many. Books are selling well. Conferences have gone well. We thank the Lord.

As such, at this time, as I quite often do, I encourage you give to the poor around you and to wherever you are being nurtured spiritually before turning to support RENOVARÉ. Thank you.

At the same time, I am well aware of our own pressing financial needs. The RENOVARÉ US monthly budget is around \$30,000, and the summer is a dry time for donations and fund-generating activities. So, realistically, we need a \$75,000 response to this appeal to make it comfortably through this summer. That is, \$75,000 in addition to all the RENOVARÉ New Projects Development Fund matching gifts that we have recently received, and for which I thank you.

For so many reasons, I hope you will give \$10, \$25, \$50, or more at this time. Thank you. Do have a wonderful summer.

Peace and joy,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Richard J. Foster". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a light blue background.

Founder and President

P.S. To give on-line, go to www.renovare.org and click on "make a financial contribution" in the menu bar on the left-hand side of the page. Or use the coupon(s) on the back of this letter to give one time or once each month this summer.

Send to RENOVARÉ in the enclosed self-addressed envelope.

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August Gift