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SPIRITUAL

PRACTICES

*in*

COMMUNITY

DRAWING  
GROUPS INTO  
THE HEART OF GOD

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## LEADING SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

**O**VER THE PAST TEN YEARS, I've shared leadership with others at a winter retreat. One of my favorite moments was when I was watching another pastor learn on the fly. We had a group of two hundred people in the room, and I had written the script he was to read. It included him encouraging individuals to share spiritually and deeply with the person next to them about their lives. As you can imagine, after two minutes of two hundred people talking, the noise level had risen considerably.

The sound system wasn't working, and without thinking, the young pastor yelled at the top of his lungs, "Hey!" Suddenly the room went silent—until he and I burst out laughing. Through his uncontrollable laughter, he said, "I guess that wasn't my best soothing spiritual voice." He held up his hand with his pointer and pinky up and the rest of the fingers folded down and confidently said, "From now on, when I'm pulling us back together, I'll raise my hand like this, and you imitate it so others know it's time to be quiet, because this is Quiet Giraffe."

I loved how he handled that moment. He was able to laugh at himself and draw the group back after a yell. He quickly regrouped and moved forward to finish the spiritual practice well. When you're leading and something unexpected happens, it's okay to laugh, regroup, and move forward. That day I learned that a spiritual practice is more than the script.

When used corporately, spiritual practices help to grow people deeply in Christ as well as with one another. They create a way—and a space—to hear the voice of God together.

#### LEADING SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Teaching spiritual practices is one of the best ways I've found to help propel a group forward. The group grows in its spiritual depth and in its relationships spiritually.

You can lead practices in various locations and groups:

- board meetings
- staff meetings
- worship services
- small groups
- mission trips
- prayer rooms
- retreats
- youth ministries
- children's ministries
- intergenerational ministries
- camps
- conferences
- around the dinner table
- during devotions

If at all possible, do a spiritual practice on your own before you lead it, even if it's a shortened form done quickly because you're about to lead the practice. It's worth taking the time to experience it yourself. This will make you more capable of talking about the process and will give you the ability to share how you met God in the practice. You'll also be able to talk about what was hard about the experience.

Doing it on your own at least once helps you with three things. First, you can share your experiences, good or bad. As you're doing a practice on your own, take a few notes about what God reveals to you as you listen for his voice. Don't limit what you write in this moment; you won't have to share everything you write down. Some moments between you and God are intimate and can help you understand why someone would choose not to share in a group.

Second, if you haven't done it yourself, it's hard to know how much silence is too long or too short to hear from God. Others have led me in spiritual practices, and when they've done it themselves beforehand, I can tell. The amount of silence seems right on target.

Third, meeting with God before you invite others into a time with God is extremely helpful for your personal spiritual well-being. All too often people in ministry forget to make sure they're feeding their own souls so they can help others. When I was training in ministry, we were reminded throughout the process that we couldn't take anyone where we weren't willing and able to go ourselves. If you aren't willing to go to the depths with God in preparation for leading a practice, you won't know how to take others there. Remind yourself of this truth as you explore each chapter.

When I first started taking time to meet with God before teaching others, no matter how hard I tried, I was unable to

quiet my mind for fear I'd forget to do something important later in the day. So I kept a small piece of paper next to me to write down what came to mind. I wouldn't have realized how distracting the need to vacuum can be if I hadn't slowed myself down to meet with God. Experiencing what those you lead may experience is invaluable.

### SET UP THE ROOM

I do spiritual practices in all sorts of settings with different numbers of people. If I'm leading a group of more than ten, it's very helpful to divide them into smaller groups that stay in one room. If I'm leading a group of more than ten, I like to set up the room with round tables with four to six people per table. Try to keep the same number of people at each table so you can all finish at about the same time.

However, I don't always have the luxury of setting up a room of round tables, so when I arrive, I assess what my game plan will be for discussions. I decide if people will move their chairs and face one another. If they're in pews or rows of chairs, I decide if I'll encourage them to turn to talk to someone behind or in front of them or have them turn to a person next to them. Think about this before you are in the moment. Also guide people very specifically so little time is lost.

If you encourage participants to talk to someone in the same pew, they'll likely be talking to someone they know. If you encourage them to turn around, they'll likely know that person less or not at all. As you think about which way to have people turn, consider what your goals are. Do you want people to go deeper in relationship, or do you want them to connect with those they don't know? Either is fine, but know what your goal is before you start.

If writing is part of the practice, you'll need to have tables or other hard surfaces to write on. If participants won't be writing,

a circle without a table is another great way to set up the space. A circle allows everyone to face one another and be on the same level. When discussion is happening, everyone in the circle needs to be able to make eye contact and to hear each other. Take time at the beginning to make sure these can happen. Hearing and seeing are key, since everyone's words are valuable to the group.

#### CREATE SPACE THAT'S NOT JUST PHYSICAL

You want people to be able to enter in, so you need to help them hold the space with God. This means both keeping track of the time and making sure you are guiding the time at the level they need and can handle. Let the group know the overall concept of the spiritual practice and that you will be the time keeper as you lead them through each step. For example, stating how long you will hold the silence and suggesting ways participants can be present to God helps them hold the space well.

Try to understand what a group can withstand and for how long. For example, you can hold times of silence longer with spiritual directors than with teenagers or children. Also, don't find the level they're comfortable with; find one they can handle. When we're growing in our faith, we're rarely comfortable. Seek a level of risk that's right on the growing edge for that particular group. Also tell the group how long the silence will be each time. For teens, one to five minutes can feel like an eternity. For spiritual directors, it can feel too short. Try hard to stick close to the time you promised the group. When you stick to that time, you gain trust with them.

Remember that people are always thinking about something. When leading a spiritual practice, one important goal is to create space so people can stop thinking about distractions and give space for God's voice to be heard. Keeping things on time

helps people not worry about their schedule. When you promise they'll have time to ask questions, make sure you hold to that time. Then when you promise you'll let them out on time, they'll know they don't need to watch the clock.

However, also follow the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit wants more time with a group, look for ways to let some people slip out of the room, if needed. It isn't life-giving when a leader tries to hold a group until they all hear the voice of God. Those sitting under your leadership who have tight schedules need the freedom to go.

At the end of each practice, get feedback from participants by asking how they're doing and how you're doing in your leadership role. That way, each time you lead a spiritual practice, you get to hone your leadership skills.

#### BREATHE DEEPLY

While a friend of mine was in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit with her little girl, she read this on a sign: "Breathing deeply resets your nervous system." Breathing deeply is also one of the easiest ways to deal with anxiety. Consider doing it before you start or at any moment when you need to reset yourself during a spiritual practice. Also, one of the best gifts you can give those you lead is a genuine space of calm as you lead. When people sense that you're calm, they feel calm. When you're full of anxiety, most people can hear it in your voice and will internalize it, even if they don't realize they're taking on your anxiety.

Therapists teach people who struggle with anxiety to do four-count breathing. This practice can be good for you as you lead and for those you're leading. Also consider having participants breathe deeply with you at the opening of each spiritual practice. This can help them focus on their breathing instead of all the other things distracting them. It's a great way to start a meeting and a great way to remember that God is the

one who breathes life into us; each breath is a gift from him. You can even remind the group of that truth. After you teach breath prayer to a group (see chapter four), you can add it to the beginning of each practice you teach.

#### LISTEN FOR THE HOLY SPIRIT

As you start any of the spiritual practices, pause and invite the Holy Spirit to speak. Also ask the Holy Spirit to speak to the people you're leading as well as to be at work in you as you speak, lead, and teach. Pray this prayer out loud, or simply pray it as you're breathing deeply before you start teaching. Set your heart and mind to desire to hear from God as you lead.

Another way to stay aware of the Holy Spirit is to light a candle. In fact, most spiritual directors light a candle in their sessions. The movement of the flame of the candle can remind you that the Spirit is moving and active in the room. Feel free to let people know why you're lighting it, so they too can stay aware of the movement of the Spirit throughout the spiritual practice. Instruct them that looking at the candle can also help them refocus on the Spirit when distracted.

#### BE YOURSELF

A good goal for the first time you lead a spiritual practice is not to chase your group away from spiritual practices permanently. People know if you're being anything but authentic. Feel free to be creative by morphing the spiritual practices in this book into your own style. Enjoy being created in the image of the great Creator by being creative yourself. If you don't do the practice yourself first, the group will know you're just reading off a script. If you don't make it your own, it won't go smoothly. If needed to take the pressure off being perfect, call it an experiment.

Let people know who you are without adding commentary as you lead. Share only what is real and true for you and what is directly connected to the practice. If what I've written regarding a practice doesn't sound like you, restate it in your own words—unless they are from the Word of God, of course.

### LEAD, DON'T PREACH

Once you've started a spiritual practice, make sure you're not preaching and instead are facilitating a space where people can meet with Jesus. Make sure each of your words is used to take people deeper into the practice rather than into a space where they're taking in factual information from you rather than what God has to say to them. It's great to teach people about God, but it's important to make sure you're creating a space for others to meet with God. If you know you're good at preaching or teaching, do that before or after the practice; don't interrupt God as he's speaking to his people. I remind myself that God is in the middle of a personal sermon for each person in the room, and that sermon will be more powerful than anything I could ever say. It's a much higher honor to lead people into a space to meet with the living God than to tell them how they can meet him.

Sometimes people tell me about their experience in group spiritual practice, and in the middle of the story, one of us realizes I was the one leading the practice. I know I've led well when the participants don't remember I was leading. The moment is about God, not the facilitator. This reality keeps me in check. If this whole idea makes you feel resistant, God may have some soul work for you to do before you start leading others into his presence.

Take a moment to lean back from these words and talk to God about how you want to be known as a great leader, or maybe how you'd rather not be a great leader—or a leader at

all. Let him speak words of affirmation over you. Let him remind you that he wants to do a mighty work in and through you. He needs your ego to step back.

God does want to use you; he wants all of us to be a part of his great work. But we must remember that it's his work, not ours. Trust me; even in the process of writing this book, I've had to let go of me being the creator. God is the great Creator, and I am created in his image so I can be creative. I can't take his place.

#### DON'T RUSH

As you're leading a spiritual practice, do your best not to rush the process. Sometimes this means being silent in front of a crowd longer than you're comfortable. Speak slowly, concisely, and gently. Leave time and space for you to hear the Holy Spirit and for those you're leading to hear too. Also be aware that some people in the room may be hard of hearing; you may have to be louder than you think.

There will be moments when you're tempted to race ahead, maybe because you're worried nothing is happening in people or maybe they're getting antsy or too quiet. It can feel scary to keep a slow pace, and you may fear running out of time. This is why doing the practice before you lead it is important; you get a feel for how long each piece takes.

If there's another leader in the room, I usually pick up that person's anxiety. He or she may be the person that hired me to lead a retreat or the senior pastor in the sponsoring church or even the power player who has no problem voicing his or her opinion during or after the practice. Try to follow God's prompting in the moment, not the feelings of a disruptive person in the room. Trust that God has a plan, and do your best to follow him in those moments.

Whether you're reading out loud or talking, it's important to speak slowly. Slowing down will help you hear the Holy Spirit, even as you're leading. Sometimes this means speaking like you are the Amplified Version of the Bible, saying something two or three ways that mean the same thing, to help people understand what you're saying. As you lead, God may add something to your sentence you don't expect.

By slowing your speech, you give space to yourself and others to hear from the Holy Spirit. We all need that space. When we speak quickly, it's hard for people to engage both with our words and with what God is prompting. You're taking people to a place where they're listening to three different voices simultaneously: theirs, yours, and God's. If you speak quickly, they can avoid the deep place with God and hear only you.

The first thing your listeners are taking in is your voice, so they need to be able to understand what you've said. Once they've heard and comprehended, they'll then be able to check in with their own internal voice. After they've heard those two levels, they can hear the still small voice of God.

This all happens almost simultaneously. If you move too fast, they'll get stuck just trying to hear and understand your voice. They'll miss checking in with themselves, making it impossible for them to hear from God. When we speak slowly, we can hear more too. We aren't just giving people information that they're writing in their notebooks.

The first time you do this, it will feel painfully slow. Let that happen. When you're finished, ask your group about your pacing. Often people want more silence in the process than you'd expect.

#### USE A TIMER

As you move through each piece of a spiritual practice, put your phone on silent and ask your listeners to do the same. This will

give you, them, and God some good space. Yet even a phone on silent during a spiritual practice can be distracting. I have been in a room where someone's phone in their purse just seems to keep vibrating, and the owner does not attend to it, but several other people in the room keep looking toward the purse. For myself, I have gotten distracted by a text that comes in as I'm leading. Even though no one else knows about it, instead of being present to the Holy Spirit and the people in the room, I'm suddenly elsewhere mentally and spiritually. I will sometimes say that as we put our phones into airplane mode, it may cause anxiety at first because we are disconnecting from people outside the room, but that it will give us good space to connect with God and others inside the room.

Before you start, decide how many minutes you want to give to each part of the practice so you don't run out of time before the end of each. The last part of a practice—debriefing with the whole group—is important. When we debrief well, the whole group gains spiritually and is unified spiritually.

Some leaders like to use a gentle alarm or vibration on their phone to let the group know time is up. I like to use my voice, since even a gentle alarm causes some people to think it's time to burst out talking about how hard it was to be in silence, jarring those who enjoyed the silence. If you use your voice, it gives space to instruct people in that moment as well.

Depending on your group, you may need to instruct them how to come out of silence. Some spiritual directors will stay quiet with their eyes closed for as long as you let them, and some middle school students blurt something out as soon as the time is up. Leading with your voice encourages people to go where you're headed next rather than to start a free-for-all.

Another important aspect to remember when leading spiritual practices is that at least one person is watching the clock.

Sometimes they're watching it because they know they have to leave at a certain time. Other clock watchers are just waiting for the class to be over. Be aware of this, because even one person can sway the whole group in the wrong direction if given the opportunity.

The key to letting the Spirit lead is to respect everyone's time. By starting and ending on time, you have a better chance of God breaking through to even the controllers in the room. This leads us into the next step.

#### GET TO KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

If you're working with a group you don't know, ask a person who knows the group well to tell you about it. If you're leading a large gathering, do your research by looking it up online, and use language similar to what they use on their website. When I'm going to a location where I don't know anyone, I arrive at least thirty minutes to an hour early. During that time, I do my best to learn a few names before we get started. If I can, I ask them a few questions to get a general idea of who's in the room before we start. When we know people's names, we have the ability to engage them specifically. I'm not suggesting calling on people, but when they raise their hand or start to talk, you can address them by name. Using names also helps the whole group feel more connected and warm.

#### STAY IN TUNE WITH YOUR AUDIENCE

While you're leading, take time to notice people's facial expressions. If you see looks of confusion, rephrase what you just said. Also use different examples to help people understand concepts.

If you've asked the group to write, when about half the people have stopped writing, move the practice along. Some people will write until you tell them to stop, but others will

write only what you've guided them to document in that moment. When those people are done, they may start thinking about something else, so help the whole group stay with what God is doing by noticing who is done and moving on to the next task at hand.

Are participants crying? Crying during a spiritual practice can be a sign that the Holy Spirit is present and that he's doing a deep work in that person's soul. When I see or hear crying, I remind the group it's okay to cry. I add that often it's because of a deep work happening inside, so it's good to let the tears flow. I try to make it sound like a general announcement, not directed at a specific person. One time after I did this, someone came to me and said, "Right when you gave us permission to cry, I had just started crying. I was so thankful you said it, so I could trust God was at work." When we notice this movement but don't name it, participants are likely to focus on trying not to cry rather than leaning into the work God is doing inside them.

Use humor as well. I do this in my introductions so skeptics know I can be fun—and so can God. However, if you tend to overuse humor, do your best to keep it in check while leading the spiritual practice so people aren't distracted from what God is doing. Create a space for them to be still and to know he is God. Also, if you feel uncomfortable with people expressing emotions, try not to interrupt with a misplaced joke. Humor is best used to put others at ease, not you as the leader.

Watch body language in the room. If people are falling asleep, pick up the pace. If people are sitting with their arms crossed, build trust with them, for instance by using humor. Chat a little bit with the group, and let them ask you a few questions about you if they seem distant. Ask them a few questions about themselves too. In the beginning of a session with youth, I first ask

a question or two that everyone knows the answer to so everyone gets to speak at least once. This allows them to feel free to say something.

Ask God to give you eyes to see what he wants you to see and ears to hear what you need to hear. Sometimes a spiritual practice will fall flat, or participants have a hard time engaging with certain ones. This is normal and okay. Address it in real time so people continue to try other spiritual practices, even if the first one or two didn't go well. I say things like, "Sometimes the first time you do a spiritual practice it's uncomfortable. These are spiritual *practices* because we're practicing connecting with God. Just like anything we practice, we get better and better the more we practice." I also usually add something like, "You may never like some spiritual practices, and it's okay." I encourage people to try everything once or twice, and I let them know if it doesn't work for them, they don't need to keep doing it. I remind them, "These practices are to help you connect with God, not to frustrate you."

#### DEBRIEF WELL

Debriefing gives the gift of hearing how God moved during a spiritual practice. When we have a powerful moment with God, the impressions it provides can fade quickly. We may even question that it happened at all. Verbalizing what God said soon after the moment brings it into reality. It helps us realize and remember what God spoke clearly.

The best questions to ask in the debriefing are open ended. An open-ended question cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. You are looking for the group to share about what God said and did during the spiritual practice. You need questions that will draw out what they just experienced with God. Not every question has to be connected to God, but do ask that

kind of question if you notice no one is focusing on God. It sometimes helps to ask a God question after you've asked a few process questions to warm up the group; most people need to have a certain level of trust before they'll share from the heart.

Here are a few questions that can be used with just about any spiritual practice:

- What was this process like for you?
- What was hard about this process?
- What did you enjoy about this process?
- What felt significant to you during the spiritual practice?
- What did you hear God saying? What do you think God was saying to *you*?
- Did any Scripture come to mind while we were doing the practice?
- Did you find yourself focusing on an attribute of God?
- What do you feel God is inviting you toward in your life now?

When you debrief the group, help them listen to each other, and encourage everyone to share something. I often have participants share with a smaller group before they share with the large group. This especially helps introverts. You're teaching the group how to have spiritual conversations not only at the time but also later.

Debriefing helps people articulate their encounter with Christ. Doing it as a group gives them the ability to engage with one another about what God is doing, and they're more likely to keep engaging with each other. This part of the process is also very important if someone had a strong negative or emotional experience.

God also calls us to walk through pain together. As Scripture says, “Mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15). It’s a privilege to carry one another’s burdens. Together we can bring them to God, for he desires to carry our burdens for us. Christ longs to grant his peace to his people, and he uses people to minister to each other so that he may be glorified.

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