

Hungry Hearts, Hungry Minds The Quest for a Reformed Spirituality

THE PRESENT TIME

There is evidence of a significant hunger among us, a hunger of the heart and mind.

To be sure, not everyone senses it. There are those in our congregations whose experience of faith in Jesus Christ is deeply satisfying. There are also communities of faith whose common life is rich and vital. Such persons and communities are hungry only for more of that which they already enjoy.

But for many other individuals and communities, a certain restlessness prevails. That restlessness is not easily described. Some will express it one way, some will express it another, while still others, finding no words at all, content themselves with sighs.

It is as if many of us were becoming aware that something is missing from our lives. We may once have enjoyed it, only to lose it. Or perhaps the realization is dawning that, if we are to be whole people, we need something that we have never had before. In either case the result is a longing within us, a yearning for something which could and even should be ours to have and to enjoy.

Perhaps some of us long for companions along life's spiritual journey. Many Christians are lonely. They do not experience the church as a community within which their deepest joys, profoundest hopes, and hardest struggles can be safely shared.

Perhaps some of us long for meaning. Many Christians wonder whether their lives count for anything. They rise early and work hard all day long, but when the night has come they question whether their loves and labors have had any ultimate significance.

Perhaps some of us long for joy. Many Christians find their lives of faith to be little more than dull routine and boring duty. They have always heard that joy is supposed to be a fruit of God's Spirit, but in truth they sometimes leave their services of worship more depressed than when they arrived.

When all is said and done, however, our longings for companions, meaning and joy are only symptoms. The real issue is far deeper, far more serious. In faith we know that a closer relationship to God is our hearts' deepest desire. Our problem, however, is with faith itself. Though we long to be able to entrust our lives to One who cares, some of us find ourselves more persuaded of God's absence than of God's presence. Our hearts remain unconvinced, unconsolated, unconvicted, unconverted.

Therefore, though we cannot always express what we are sensing, though we cannot always name what we are seeking, the challenge we face is to grow in our lives of Christian faith. We need more deeply felt and satisfying relationships to God and to one another, and more authentic and fulfilling ways to live out our discipleship in this complex and challenging world. We dare to believe that if we can only satisfy this hunger of all hungers, every other human longing will be transformed or satisfied in ways which we cannot even foresee.

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

It seems apparent that the hungers of our time are present not only in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) but also in the culture at large. Recently these hungers have become evident in a veritable explosion of interest in spirituality. But what is this about which so many are speaking?

Surely "spirituality" refers first and foremost to the Holy Spirit of the living God who has drawn near in Jesus Christ. Some persons define the term broadly, regarding spirituality as a virtual synonym for the living of the Christian life. They see it as the process of our being filled

and transformed by God's Spirit, living joyfully in God's presence, responding freely to God's grace.

Others define the term more narrowly. They take as their beginning point the conviction that there are certain human practices through which God's Spirit often works to enlighten and renew our hearts and minds. Spirituality, they say, is the intentional, disciplined commitment to those practices by persons who wish to grow in their faith and in their capacity to live as Jesus Christ's obedient disciples.

There is no real need to choose between these two understandings. Our experience confirms that being led by God's Spirit, on the one hand, and seeking the guidance of God's Spirit, on the other, are present as different moments of the Christian life. Each is necessary, and as long as both are present, it makes little difference by what name each is called. Both constitute spirituality.

Presbyterians have their own distinctive contributions to make to the larger discussion about spirituality. One of the greatest is our insistence that the deepest longings of Christians will be satisfied only by a faith which also takes with utter seriousness both our estranged hearts and their need for transformation, and our suffering world and its need for transformation.

We believe that God desires our commitment to corporate and individual worship, prayer, and reflection. We also affirm, however, that God desires our faithful discipleship in the world. It is our witness that God's Spirit meets, speaks to, and changes us both "out there" in the world and "in here" in our prayer and worship.

This unity of prayer and action in the Christian life is deeply rooted in the Reformed tradition from which our denomination springs. For far too long, however, we have allowed that unity and the tradition itself to be betrayed by calls to a one-sided allegiance. For instance, while some have insisted that evangelism is the church's only true concern, others have been equally insistent that the church's mission is to

work for the transformation of an unjust world. But the drawing of such battle-lines has been deeply destructive. It has both compromised our witness to Jesus Christ and rent asunder the Presbyterian Church.

In the search for an authentic spirituality, one true to our tradition, the scattered people of God may once again discover their essential calling and unity. It is in that quest that those who have forgotten how to pray will be invited to learn to do so once again. And it is in that quest that those who have ignored the suffering of our planet and of its people will be invited to rediscover their call to exercise compassion and to work for justice, for peace, and for the healing of the created order.

THE THEOLOGY AND WORSHIP MINISTRY UNIT

The reality that so many of us have such hungers is not bad news for the church. On the contrary it is good news, for it means that the wind of God's Spirit is blowing, stirring us to new thoughts, new questions, new visions, and new commitments. Evidence of the Spirit's work in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is the denomination's concern for discipleship and spirituality.

What needs to happen among us may happen as individuals, congregations, presbyteries, and synods dare one by one to make the new commitments to which they are being called. As they do so, the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit offers its support. Part of its work is to offer advice and counsel to the General Assembly Council as that body seeks to "cultivate and promote the spiritual welfare of the whole church." But an even more important part is to serve individual believers and congregations as the Spirit moves among them. It does so by listening to the longings of Presbyterians, by helping them interpret what is happening in their lives of faith, and by fostering communication among persons with similar concerns. The Unit also encourages new initiatives in congregations, presbyteries, and synods, and serves as a bridge between hungry persons in our own



denomination and movements of renewal in the church at large.

The resources available to the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit for its efforts in discipleship and spirituality are severely limited. In order to make the best use of those resources in responding to the needs of hungry hearts and minds within the denomination, the Unit both seeks the partnership of other offices of the General Assembly, synods, and presbyteries, and endeavors to apply its efforts to those areas where they will have the greatest effect. It believes that, at the present moment of the church's life, the following eight areas, listed in no order of priority, deserve special attention.

1. **Communities of Prayer, Discernment and Action.** The Unit encourages the intentional and disciplined gathering of congregations, families, and other communities within the church for prayer, sharing of joys and struggles, study of their context, listening for God's voice speaking through Scripture, efforts to discern the obedience to which they are being called, and engagement in common ministry.

2. **Presbytery Programs.** The Unit helps presbyteries and synods to consider seriously and respond appropriately to the hungers of those within their bounds.

3. **Leadership Training.** The Unit contributes to the cultivation within the church of leaders who can help church members both understand their longings for a more fulfilling life of faith and find appropriate ways to satisfy them.

4. **Resources.** The Unit makes available to the church programs and resources in the area of discipleship and spirituality.

5. **Communication.** The Unit maintains communication with persons who have ministries related to discipleship and spirituality, in order to encourage conversation among them, foster a common vision, and establish and sustain effective partnerships.

6. **Needs of Ministers and Candidates.** The Unit works with theological educators and others involved in the training, continuing education, and oversight of candidates and ministers, in order that the church's leadership might both receive the nourishment which it needs and become increasingly able to help a membership which is spiritually hungry.

7. **Theological Discernment.** The Unit encourages the kind of theological reflection on our current experience of religious hunger which will serve both to clarify that hunger's origins and to point the way toward more fulfilling lives of faith.

8. **Gifts of the Larger Church.** The Unit helps the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) become aware of and be enriched by the vitality present both within the diversity of its own membership and in various partner churches around the world.

At the recommendation of the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit, the 203rd General Assembly (1991) approved *Hungry Hearts, Hungry Minds: The Quest for a Reformed Discipleship and Spirituality* and called for its programmatic implementation. Since that time, organizational changes have created the **Office of Spiritual Formation** within the Theology, Worship, and Discipleship Program Area, which has the responsibility for this implementation. For more information, contact the office at 888-728-7228, extension 5306 or through www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation .

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