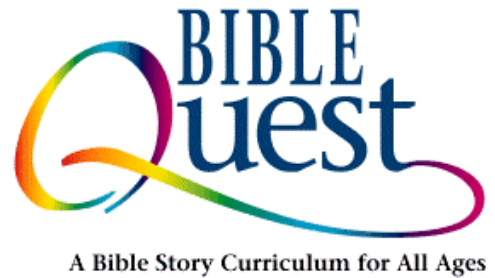


Leader Article



Spiritual Formation for Leaders

The last decade has seen an increase in the number of people seeking an enriched spirituality. The search for inner meaning has been the topic of many media presentations on television and in the printed news. The 1990s drew attention to feminine and masculine spiritualities and to the spirituality of Native Americans, Hispanic people, and other ethnic cultures. For our purpose we use the classical term spirituality to refer to a community's or person's relationship with God, who is spirit. Spirituality is engaging in the adventure of becoming friends with God. We open more and more to God and want more and more to hear what God is like and how the Creator is calling us to live in relationship to the Creator, ourselves, and others.

Spiritual formation is another classical term that refers to all the disciplines, such as teaching, Bible study, prayer, and other activities that nurture our spiritual lives of faith. *Bible Quest* is designed to provide opportunities for the nurture and support of faith in believers.

Faith must be nurtured from childhood through adulthood. This article explores five questions related to the way that the faith of leaders is guided and stimulated through the use of the *Bible Quest* curriculum, worship, the church, relationship, and story. We will explore these questions:

- What resources for spiritual growth and faith development does the curriculum include?
- What can churches do to help leaders grow in the faith?
- How do relationships with learners contribute to the faith growth of leaders?
- What is the connection between storytelling, interpretation, and faith growth?
- How does hearing the story in worship help the leader grow in faith and be a storyteller using *Bible Quest*?

1. What resources for spiritual growth and faith development does the curriculum include?

In the Leader's Guides the sections "Enter the Story" (Read, Contemplate, Pray), "A Story behind the Story," and the four-step group process (Prepare, Tell, Connect, Celebrate) in each session assist the leader in spiritual growth and faith development. The inclusion of music and the use of imagination, remembering, Bible study, and silence create an environment that helps the leader to be more available to the Creator and more receptive to God's voice. For example, music assists the leader in celebrating the faith affirmations contained in the words of the songs. It helps the listener incorporate these affirmations into his or her own spiritual life. Relaxing the inner self in song with others nurtures one's sense of relationship with the community and deepens one's Christian identity.

The second example concerns the use of the spiritual discipline of silence. The use of silence gives leaders space for remembering who they are in Christ. It allows them to reach for and open to God's presence more intimately and directly.

2. What can churches do to help leaders grow in faith?

Recovering the role of pastor as teacher is a primary way that churches can help leaders grow. The pastor and educator can work as a team to make education a pivotal part of discipleship training for all members. The planning that results from such a partnership will unify the roles of church school and worship for the purpose of forming a holistic and inclusive faith in the leaders and members of the congregation.

Secondly, small-group reflective Bible studies and spiritual deepening groups, in which spiritual disciplines are learned and practiced, encourage spiritual formation and the discovery of gifts. The skills of interpretation are enhanced, and the practice of spiritual disciplines gives increased moments for listening to God and discerning how God is moving in one's life, in the life of the community, and in the world. These opportunities also act as preparation for worship by helping the leader have a more expectant attitude. This sense of expectancy enables the leader to be a more active participant in the service. Thus, worship becomes more meaningful and authentic for the leader and for all members who are part of these small-group experiences.

It is imperative that leaders have opportunities to explore the paradoxes and tensions of the faith. They must be involved in selecting curriculum based on their needs and those of the congregation. They must also have support as they struggle toward the use of their gifts in purposeful ministry in the world. It is essential that leaders understand that curriculum is all of life. (See *Faith Passages and Patterns* by Thomas A. Droege.) These expressions and tasks of adult faith development can be fostered in the following ways:

- creating prayer partners and prayer ministries turning committees into communities through the use of devotions
- practicing the spiritual discipline of discernment in decision making
- providing opportunities to listen to the reflective sharing of personal faith stories, including defeats, and commitment that make the connection with "The Story"
- singing the hymns and faith songs of the whole church, those from every ethnic family
- coordinating preaching with the curriculum through the use of Quest Links

3. How do relationships with learners contribute to the faith growth of leaders?

As the leader and learner enter the story together, the leader is able to consider the scripture story from the perspectives of the learners. Connections between the leader's story and the stories of the learners open the leader to new faith insights and to the recognition of the diverse ways that God speaks to believers. As leaders listen to the ways the learners make intersections between the scriptures and their lives, they are stimulated to look at their own life and the use of their spiritual gifts in new ways. As they hear the reflections and interpretations of the various stories, they experience the sharing of feelings and emotions that causes the learners to know more about God, themselves, and others in the group. This deepened knowledge of the participants causes leader and learners to bond as pilgrims on the way. The exposure to different gifts, learning styles, and appropriations of scripture assists the leader in accepting and appreciating each faith pilgrim as a person of sacred worth and value. These interactions enable the group members to see one another more with the eyes of Christ.

When leaders pray for their group members, they develop a willingness and desire to participate in God's will and actions. The fruit of compassion for others, for the church, and for the world results, making the leaders more aware of themselves as vessels of the Spirit that works through them to bring about the Creator's will and way in the lives of group members as they move in the world as instruments of liberation and social justice.

4. What is the connection between storytelling, interpretation, and faith growth?

In traditional African American spirituality, the African American Christian goes to church not only to hear "...thus says the Lord," but also to testify of "What Jesus has done for me." These and all such testimonies are rooted in understanding our identity – who we are – and this is rooted in whose we are. Because Christians are those who live in conscious and consistent relationship with God, the initial step is commitment to Christian discipleship. Necessary to the forming of this identity and discipleship is the biblical story, historical understandings of the Christian tradition, and faith, that is, an active trust in and steadfast loyalty toward God. Faith in God establishes the center of value around which all other loyalties are structured. This relationship of action and being is nurtured as we hear the story, testify, and listen to the testimonies of God's action in life and the world. These resulting insights are incorporated into one's character. Reflection, interpretation, and appropriation-all guided by the Spirit of God-are additional requirements for this formation process.

Through *Bible Quest* the Bible story comes alive and is brought into the present. This process is supported as the group explores the past contexts, people, actions of God, and people's responses. Through prayer, guided imagery, music, imagination, discussion, drama, and art the learners live and experience the reality of the Bible story and its message for then and for now. This sense of "realness" is enhanced as fellow pilgrims share reflective testimonies and insights gleaned from the Bible story and as the leader and learners struggle together to find the meaning of these revelations for living in the world as Christians.

5. How does hearing the story in worship help the leader grow in faith and be a storyteller using *Bible Quest*?

When worship is a vital experience for each member of the congregation, we are led into the Divine Presence and genuine encounter with the living Christ. This genuine encounter breathes life into our faith and our faith expression. Every part of the liturgy has new depth for leader and learner. Reflection and interpretation of the story are enriched as the leaders hear in the preached Word the development of the themes of incarnation, covenant, salvation, and justice and liberation.

As the members affirm their faith through hymns, express sorrow through confession, rejoice in assurance of pardon, pray for the needs of the community, and finally hear the benediction “Depart to serve,” the congregation leaves worship empowered and filled with the Spirit, ready to tell the good news of God’s love, grace, and social justice, in the places where they live and work and have their being!