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What Is a “Spirit Leader”?

“Spirit Leaders” are ordinary people answering an extraordinary call upon their lives. This is a call above and beyond the duties so typical to daily life and to congregational life. Being this kind of leader has almost nothing to do with our “official” church offices, such as deacon, board chair, elder, church school teacher, or minister. This call is infinitely deeper than whatever our “churchly responsibilities” might be. It is a calling beyond even the power infused by installation or ordination in our faith community.

The call to spiritual leadership is based on the double claim of the Divine upon the soul. The first claim might be named the “claim of creation.” The Genesis narrative paints a picture of God sprinkling a pinch of common dust into God’s hand, then adding a touch of uncommon destiny, and breathing the Spirit of life into the human soul. This metaphor of “dust plus destiny” is witness to the psalmist’s word that “I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14). Our very existence is intended to be a doxology—a weighty word of glory—to God’s awesome provision and providence in which we are born. Out of sheer delight to be alive, and to be alive in God’s life, we offer ourselves to love and serve.

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The second call of God upon our souls is the claim of re-creation. This claim relates to the human need for reconciliation and redemption. Because we are so broken by the “business” of life, humankind needs a second infusion of the breath of God. Speaking with Nicodemus, Jesus alluded to the spiritual necessity of a second birth, being born from above, of Spirit (Jn. 3). This second wind, this enthusing (literally “breathing in God”), this invisible wind of the Spirit upon the soul, brings about re-creation—the transformation of our inner being and a radical reorientation toward our life-giving God. Once we catch our second breath, the call of God is upon us to become partners in the redemption and re-creation of the world.

These unique callings connect the soul with God-in-the-depths and open us to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. But spiritual leadership is more than just connection. We are talking about something beyond delight in being part of God’s creation and serving in God’s re-creation of the world. We allude to a leadership lifestyle, a way of being before God and with others that not only keeps us in constant communion, connection, and refreshment with the Divine, but also keeps us open and sensitive to the Spirit’s leadership. Spiritual leadership requires regular refreshment from the Spirit and listening with a mind to obey, to act on what we hear. Daily discourse with the Spirit helps test whether our leadership vision, leadership plans, and leadership actions are truly the fruit of being a Spirit Leader, or just human ambitions wrapped in spiritual language.

Before you mentally roll your eyes and conjure up mild-mannered Disciples morphing into snake-handling charismatics, ask yourself: Can God trust me?

Can God trust me to be open (or at least open to being open) to the gifts and graces the Spirit constantly offers? The Spirit draws us into the Light. The Spirit illumines, convicts, and convinces. Through the Spirit we are baptized and blessed, discipled and directed, anointed and appointed for leadership in Christ’s body and in the world he seeks to redeem.

Spirit Leaders are "regular folks" whose lives are lived in a continually open awareness that God's mercies bless them and make life livable. They are conscious of actually moving through life from one moment of mercy to the next. In gratitude for God's goodness, they offer up in a worshipful spirit everything they are and have on a moment-to-moment basis. Their lives are "their own," and yet "not their own." Their joy evokes a deep desire to live in such a way that their whole life is quite simply a "gift," and that gift is "offered up" to God. Paul names this in Romans 12 as joyful awe for the tender mercies of God, who sustains us with an unending outpouring of kindness upon our lives, whereby all the gifts and graces we need are provided.

However, these gifts and graces are often supplied in a manner not unlike what the folks at the Georgetown, Kentucky, Toyota Plant refer to as "just-in-time" manufacturing. This ingenious method allows the warehouse to replenish the parts bins out of which workers build cars on the assembly line *only* as the very last part currently in the bin is being used. For Toyota, this saves millions of dollars in warehouse storage and extra handling. Spirit Leaders live out of this knowledge of God's abundance, trusting that God's grace will appear in God's just-in-time way and will reverberate to God's purpose and glory. No wonder Spirit Leaders sing "all I have needed thy hand hath provided—Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!"¹

Spirit Leaders are ordinary people who accomplish extraordinary things for God's kingdom and for Christ's church. They are not content to sit in prayer circles, light candles, collect neat mystical experiences, and notch their belts with nifty retreat techniques. They exude no airs of spiritual superiority. They live simply in the Spirit—not so they can feel good, but so they can learn how to serve God's purpose for their lives. They integrate

¹Words by Thomas O. Chisholm, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," © 1923, renewed 1951, Hope Publishing Co.

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their Spirit encounters into human community and everyday relationships of love and loyalty. This good humor and sense of unselfconscious grace and wholeness is often a special mark of the Spirit.

Sue lives a simple life of service to God through the Disciple congregation into which she was born eight decades ago. After a WW II career as a U.S. Army M.A.S.H. unit nurse following General Patton's lightning march across Europe, she settled down and raised a family. No one around Sue ever doubts what this former Army nurse really thinks or why. Widowed many years ago, her life is devoted to practical prayer and serving the needs of others through her beloved CWF kitchen crew. The church kitchen serves as a base of operations for her Spirit Leader ministry. Friends might tease her about being Brother Lawrence's "sister," but whenever a need—of any kind—arises in the life of a family or individual, Sue's spiritual antennae are finely tuned to pick up on subtle vibrations. Her "wise woman" intuitions and her heart for God move heaven and earth to meet that need. All this without any fanfare that calls attention to herself in any way, yet she clearly leads with her spirit.

Mary Ann has just been elected elder chair at her church in a posh suburb. The aging facility is still stunning, but the underbelly of the congregation has been riddled with scandals and gossip while the elders conduct monthly sessions that resemble mini board meetings, focusing on property issues and ignoring the spiritual disarray. Enthused by the spiritual vision of her new pastor, Mary Ann took it upon herself to literally rearrange the furniture of the elders' meeting. No more rows of chairs facing a lectern and microphone! She centered a circle of chairs around a worship table, lit a candle, and focused the conversation on key spiritual practices, such as meditation on scripture, as ways into God's presence and toward consensus-building through discernment. These practices are beginning to feed the elders' souls.

She has taken some heavy hits from the executive and administrative types for her firm rule: *no* business in elders' meetings!

She has even been known to "blow the whistle and call a foul" when someone starts talking business. Her courageous insistence makes the walk Daniel took through the lion's den look like a frolic in the park! However, after six months, the elders have started teasing her about her leadership style, which among Disciples means they like you!

Although only in his early fifties, Ralph could retire tomorrow if he wanted to, so you know it's not about the money. At 5:00 every morning, as he begins his hour-long commute to work, his car becomes his cathedral. He prays, sings, and meditates as much as driving 80 miles per hour will allow! He told his minister, Chuck, that, by the time he arrives at his desk, "I pretty well have my marching orders for the day." When someone in the community is dying, Ralph feels called to that person's side, almost compelled to befriend and companion him or her through the toughest passages at life's end. Ralph has the spiritual gift of getting next to people, and he is not afraid to talk about *anything*. He has walked many a dying soul—friends and strangers—down through the dark valley of the shadow. Because these losses break his heart, he wonders aloud to Chuck: "How do I get myself in the middle of these mine fields?"

His minister tells him: "Because God can count on you to follow orders!" Here is a tough-minded and high-powered executive who is a highly unlikely Spirit Leader. Ralph never quite seems to understand that his faithfulness in following God's nudges is exactly what brings the next nudge his way!

Each of these Spirit Leaders is captivated by the joyful abundance that makes it possible for them, at least in their better moments, to live as Jesus lived—in communion and worshipful connection with God. They rest in what might simply be called "the blessed assurance." Who they are before God is the central core of who they are before others. This kind of authenticity and integrity allows certain things in the soul to be "deeply settled." It is clear that these people's lives are no longer "all about them." People who lead out of this abundance and assurance are mighty forces and resources in the spiritual realm.

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This brings us to a word about spiritual giftedness. We have yet to meet an ordinary person doing extraordinary things for God who does not possess a deep sense of giftedness. Spirit Leaders are not prima donnas who take on some sort of “spiritual celebrity” status. However, when a person discovers what Frederick Buechner calls the intersection “where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet,”² all the gifts and graces needed to offer that particular service are quietly supplied. This surrender to delight in obeying God serves to release an astonishing energy that echoes Paul’s famous Philippian affirmation: “I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me!” (4:13). In fact, many Spirit Leaders report they experience graces and gifts they didn’t even know they had until they stepped up to meet a fresh challenge or a tough assignment.

Isn’t it time we Disciples gave up our paranoia about the self-aggrandizing abuse of spiritual gifts and simply relax, recognize, and more fully rejoice in the blessings of spiritual gifts?

The search, discovery, and exploration of the positive use of our spiritual gifts are intended to be a grace in our lives, so that we need not stress and strain, trying to do God’s work without God’s strength. Gifts can be both job descriptions for our next ministry assignment and joys that carry us to new depths in our desire for union with God. Quite often the healing and integration of our own inner wounds bring gifts that make new ministry possible. Spirit Leaders know this joy.

What, then, are Spirit Leaders? Spirit Leaders really are ordinary people who become aware of God’s call, choose to live in radical openness to God, and exercise their gifts where God’s Spirit nudges them into service.

Questions for Reflection

1. What helps you keep in close communication with the Holy Spirit?

²Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 95.

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2. To what degree can God trust you? What does this trust look like in real life? In what areas could you become more trustworthy?
3. Does “gratitude for God’s goodness” describe your attitude through most days? How are you living out the generosity of Jesus?
4. Have you experienced God’s “just-in-time” provision? What did you learn through those experiences?
5. How have you come to understand the place of “feeling good” in the life of a Spirit Leader—a primary motivation, a desired outcome of obedience, a gift of grace?
6. Name an occasion or example from your life of integrating divine encounters into everyday relationships.
7. If a description of “integrity” is a 100 percent correspondence between who you are before God and who you are before others, what is your percentage?
8. Have you been at “the intersection between the world’s deep need and your own deep joy?” What are you learning there about your own giftedness?