

Reprinted from "A Congregation of Mystics: Reigniting Our Passion for Encountering and Experiencing God" by N. Graham Standish, *CONGREGATIONS* (vol. 31, no. 2, spring 2005), with permission from the Alban Institute. Copyright © by The Alban Institute, Inc., Herndon, VA. All rights reserved.

A Congregation of Mystics Reigniting Our Passion for Encountering and Experiencing God

By N. Graham Standish

I've always felt something has been lacking from our modern churches, something essential. Growing up I acutely felt this lack, which drove me to leave the church at 15. People like me thirsted for spiritual water, an oasis in the midst of life's desert. Our thirst was expressed in our questions, questions that the church didn't seem to hear, let alone address: "Where is God in the midst of suffering? How can we experience God personally? How do I hear God?" Like so many other spiritual nomads of my generation, I wandered and sought God elsewhere. I returned only when I found that the new age philosophies and spiritual movements of the day offered only mirages.

In the early 1980s I went to seminary, hoping to find spiritual water, but everything I studied seemed so dry and lifeless. It wasn't until after seminary that I finally discovered the spiritual water I had been seeking. I discovered it in the upper balcony of a little bookstore in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where I found the writings of Christian mystics from throughout the ages, writings I explored more deeply a few years later during my doctoral studies in spiritual formation.

The writings of these mystics helped me digest the dry, creedal, and systematic theology of the mainline church. Reading the writings of mystics like Dorotheos of Gaza, Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Genoa, Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, George Fox, John Wesley, Horace Bushnell, Hannah Whitall Smith, Thomas Kelly, Catherine Marshall, C. S. Lewis, and Henri Nouwen offered answers to so many of my questions, for they rooted their theology and answers in an experience of, rather than speculation about, God. They saw church as the place of a living encounter with God rather than a place ruled by an ethical, moral, theological equation: *Live according to the Bible and the Golden Rule, study the Bible, say that Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior, and win a free trip to heaven.* What the mystics spoke of was an encounter and experience of the Trinity that transforms life.

The Christian Mystical Tradition

What is a mystic? Theologians have tried to define mystics for centuries. Unfortunately, most mistakenly define mystics according to their ascetic lifestyles, prayer practices, or mystical experiences and visions. These are not what define mystics. They are a byproduct of what mystics seek in their lives, which is to live according to Luke 10:27 by seeking to love God with everything they have and to love others as themselves. Their pursuit of a loving relationship with God defines them. They devote their lives to the quest for God and God's love, and this quest leads them to uniquely live, pray, and experience God. It is a mistake to think of a mystic only as a person living a cloistered, contemplative life, for many mystics live busy, active lives, but in a way that is centered in God. Whether we are talking about the teachings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers,

the confessions of Augustine, the medieval musings of Bernard of Clairvaux or Meister Eckhart, the theological explorations of Martin Luther, or the stories of C. S. Lewis, mystics have continually pointed out that God can be encountered, experienced, and united with through love, prayer, and the cultivation of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22_23).

How do the experiences and writings of the mystics intersect the life of the church? Mystics reside at the center of every major Christian movement. Point to any true renewal movement within any denomination, a movement that actually leads people to encounter and experience the triune God, and you will discover mystics at their core, proclaiming their message that God can be tangibly and passionately sensed, discerned, and embraced throughout life. Mystics have always led people to follow their example of surrender to, uniting with, and serving the Trinity. Unfortunately, the church hasn't always listened. In fact many of these mystics were criticized and sometimes even persecuted (like John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, Martin Luther, and George Fox) for preaching this message of a personal experience of God.

Church Resistance to Mystical Tradition

Too many of our modern churches have lost a passion for God. They have become functional rather than spiritual. They function like organizations whose main task is offering religious programming rather than as a body incarnating and opening people to God's presence. Ministry in these churches is dominated by functional concerns over organization, programming, and adhering to tradition for tradition's sake. They forget that ministry has to have a spiritual aim to be truly transforming and lead people to Christ.

The people of today yearn for much more than just a functional, routine set of rituals and practices. They want to encounter the Trinity in deeply spiritual ways, but their churches and denominations seem blind to their yearning. A 2003 survey conducted by the Presbyterian Church (USA) Research Services reveals this blindness.¹ The survey found that spiritual formation was an integral part to a "very great extent" (42 percent) of church members' lives, which suggests a deep spiritual hunger among our laity. Yet only 6 percent reported that spiritual formation was to a very great extent an integral part of their congregational life. Less than 2 percent reported that it was to a very great extent an integral part of the life of the larger judicatory bodies or the denomination as a whole. This survey certainly has its flaws, and represents only one mainline denomination. Still, the findings suggest that there is a serious disconnect between the spiritual lives of individuals and the openness of congregations and denominations as a whole to a more spiritual approach.

Why do so many mainline churches persist in emphasizing functionality and the routine when members are hungry for spiritual nourishment? Part of the answer lies in the leadership of our congregations. When leaders, both pastoral and lay, are called forth at every level of the denomination, they generally are called based on their functional abilities: Does he have experience in management? Is she organized? Does he have the technical skills for this committee's work? Does she have the ability to get things done? We rarely ask where these leaders are spiritually. We rarely ask whether they pray and believe in prayer, how much they believe that God can be encountered and experienced, or the extent to which they have faith that God will bless the church

and cause great things to happen. In effect, we don't generally call mystics to lead mystics.

The Quaker spiritual theologian Thomas Kelly says that at the core of every church lies a "blessed community,"² a community made up of mystics centered in prayer, who sense God's presence throughout the church, and whose faith sustains those around them, even though they may be largely unnoticed by the larger congregation. They are generally not the people we call to lead the church, yet they are the ones sought out by the members when they are struggling, in pain, and need to sense God's presence in their lives.

So many churches resist calling these people to lead precisely because these mystics emphasize the experience of and service to God over everyday functioning. Their primary orientation is living in the kingdom of God in the here and now, while the primary orientation of many of our functional leaders is the "real" world—the world of business, political, and organizational life in which God seems to have little role to play. It is difficult to ask people whose everyday milieu is a world without God to lead a church into the kingdom of God. This does not mean that only mystics should be called into leadership, for not every mystic has leadership qualities, but spiritual openness should be a primary quality we look for in leadership. The best alternative, of course, is always to call leaders who have their feet firmly planted in both camps, people who are mystics operating in the "real" world.

Fanning the Mystical Embers of a Church

So how do we lead a church to become a community of mystics living in the kingdom and the real world? There are specific practices and techniques churches can adopt, such as offering spiritual retreats, classes on prayer, and programs on the spiritual disciplines. Adding these to a church's program may promote greater spiritual awareness, but they can also become more of the same—functional programs that now have a spiritual bent. Congregational transformation requires more. It requires a new way, a more spiritual way, of doing church. The following are specific ideas that can help transform the church, some of which are expounded upon in greater depth in my book *Becoming a Blessed Church*.³

A. Mystical Leadership: to expand on what was said in the previous section, the transformation of our congregations requires that we call forth leaders, both pastoral and lay, who are open to the mystical and the spiritual. This means that the pastors of a church must have a passion for encountering and experiencing God the Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit in everything. When the pastors of a church have this passion, it allows them to lead a church to move in a more spiritual direction.

Still, the pastor cannot do it all. A pastor can set a course, but lay leaders must move the congregation toward its destination. What the pastor can do is lead the church to seek lay leaders who share a passion for God and prayer, are willing to listen for God's guidance, are aware of Christ's continual presence all around them, and can walk in faith, trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit to bless their work and the congregation. Pastors can also train lay leaders to connect their faith with their leadership. While there are resources available to help with this, many of which are available through the Alban Institute, much of this work is also new to the life of congregations, and requires that pastors and leaders be creative in designing new programs.

B. Inviting Leaders and Members to Seek God's Will Rather than Their

Own: One of the biggest impediments to creating a congregation of mystics has to do with how we decide issues within most mainline churches and denominations. *Robert's Rules of Order* has been a tremendous blessing to the life of most congregations and denominations, but with *Robert's Rules* has come spiritual dilemma. While they have brought order to the pandemonium that used to characterize church meetings prior to the 19th century, they simultaneously diminish God's role in decision-making. These guidelines have pushed God to the margins precisely by ensuring a fair democratic process in which the majority rules. Is majority rule the same as God's rule?

There is nothing in scripture that suggests that God's will is inherently found in the majority. What scripture does say is that the will of Christ is to be our aim. Unfortunately, our system of bringing forth issues for discussion, debate, and vote emphasizes the will of the people rather than the will of Christ.

An alternative way of leading a church supplements *Robert's Rules* by emphasizing discernment and seeking God's will over our own. As Charles Olsen and Danny Morris have demonstrated in their book *Discerning God's Will*, there is another way that entails framing issues in terms of what Christ is calling us to do.⁴ It encourages leaders and church boards to discuss issues, ask questions, and then prayerfully seek God's will for the church. In voting on an issue, it entails asking the board to vote on what they sense God's will is for the church. Simply by leading a vote with, "All who sense this may be God's will say yes," rather than "All in favor say yes" (which is a vote based on the majority, not God) dramatically changes the church because it emphasizes the pursuit and discernment of God's will rather than our own.

C. From Reactive to Proactive to Spirit-Active Ministry: Throughout my ministry I have read many books and attended many conferences with a compelling message: We need to move from reactive to proactive ministry. I believe this wholeheartedly. Too many churches spin their wheels trying to react to the whirlwind of life around them. It's much better to be proactive, to gain a sense of what is coming, to plan ahead, and be prepared. The problem with proactivity is that it is rooted in rational analysis and careful planning based on reasonable future projections. What's so bad about that? Who can complain about leaders who coolly analyze a church's needs and cautiously plan for the future? The problem is that it is leadership rooted in human analysis and planning rather than in discernment, faith, and service.

When rationally analyzing needs and problems becomes more important than discerning God's will, God gets left out of the decision making. When careful planning becomes more important than faith and service, people end up relying on their own judgment rather than on seeking God's will. They become more interested in following "the faith" rather than in following God "in faith."

Claude King tells a wonderful story demonstrating how human analysis and planning can actually inhibit God's work.⁵ In 1984, King set out to make his mark in the world by serving God. A recent seminary graduate, he felt called to be a tent-making pastor planting new churches. He read every book he could on church planting, analyzed likely areas to plant churches, and made careful plans for building a congregation. He spent 18 months putting together his "business" plan. Then nothing happened. For six years he waited for a chance to start a church and put his plans into action, but all he encountered were obstacles and disinterest from others.

Then he met Henry Blackaby, a popular teacher in the area of faith and service. Blackaby taught him that we can't serve God unless we are first rooted in prayer and faith. Ministry needs to be a faithful response to God's calling, not activity based on our own plans for God. So King rooted his plans in prayer. He joined a local organization devoted to grounding church plantings in prayer. An amazing thing happened. They visited local churches and asked people to join them in prayerfully seeking God's will. After just three months, they had a list of fourteen towns or groups that wanted to start churches. They had become "Spirit-active" rather than merely reactive or proactive.

To be Spirit-active means to act on a foundation of prayer in a way that trusts the Holy Spirit to work through us. A mystical congregation understands this. No matter what ministries they attempt, they resist the temptation to program for program's sake. They don't look at the needs around them and say, "Let's start a program to deal with this need." They see the world around them and ask, "God, how are you calling us to respond?" They then let the Spirit guide them to develop and form unique ministries.

Being Spirit-active means growing organically as a church, responding to opportunities as the Spirit presents them to us. This is a much easier way of doing ministry because it means doing things when the time is ripe. It doesn't force ministry or mission, but lets it grow according to God's timetable. It is a way of doing ministry and leading a church that is much more relaxed because it resists the temptation to do for doing's sake that afflicts so many churches.

D. Openness to Mystical Experience: Some members, and especially leaders, of many churches distrust and fear mystical experiences. As a result, they are skeptical of people who have numinous experiences—experiences of God that transcend normal human experience—such as discernments, visions, near death experiences, or supernatural events. Often, when people share their experiences among church members, they are treated as though they are a bit weird, and their experiences are dismissed as being "just their imagination." What's ironic is that most sermons are based on either the mystical experiences of biblical figures, or spiritual teachings on how we can encounter and experience God.

The truth is that many church members have had mystical experiences, and it is a mystical experience of God's call that led most pastors to become pastors. Encouraging members and leaders to share their mystical experiences opens the church spiritually by making spiritual seeking and experience the norm rather than the exception. For instance, last year our church published a small booklet as a Lenten resource called "Calvin Stories" that contained self-written stories by members of the church about their mystical experiences of God. As pastor, I also tell stories in my sermons of mystical experiences, both my own and those of others (with permission) in order to help people recognize that it is normal for Christians to have these experiences.

Becoming a mystical congregation means becoming a place where mystical experiences are both accepted and expected. To nurture this kind of acceptance, leaders have to create a culture and ethos of church in which stories of God experiences are valued and shared by encouraging pastoral and lay leaders, who share their own experiences of God through sermons, newsletters, Web sites, groups, and conversations. Ultimately, creating a congregation of mystics means creating a culture of mystical experience.

To Become a Congregation of Mystics

The path to becoming a congregation of mystics is not necessarily an easy path because it requires that we overcome resistance from members and leaders who are skeptical of the mystical. How do we make this transition? It all begins in prayer by asking God to lead us.

Leaders also must become gentle guides, recognizing that this path is a scary one for people who are used to believing that God is distant. This kind of transformation takes years of gentle guidance that continually calls people deeper into the mystical life.

Finally, we leaders have to be sure that in creating a congregation of mystics we don't try to create God or the church in our own image. We must look for opportunities to move the church in God's direction, even when it is different from our direction. Ultimately, to be a congregation of mystics means to be a congregation that grows in Christ to become Christ's body in our own unique places.

NOTES

1. *Hungryhearts*, Winter 2004, Vol. XIII, No. 4 (Louisville, KY: Office of Spiritual Formation of the Presbyterian Church (USA)).
2. Thomas Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 54.
3. N. Graham Standish, *Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Spiritual Purpose, Presence, and Power* (Herndon, VA): Alban Institute, 2005).
4. Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1997).
5. Henry Blackaby and Claude King, *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994), x_xii.