SEVEN SPIRITUAL PATHWAYS

Our individual uniqueness means we will all experience God’s presence and learn to relate to God in different ways. Often in our churches we give people a “one-size-fits all” approach to spiritual growth, like a doctor who prescribes the same medicine for everything from rickets to pneumonia. God wants to be fully present with each of us. But because God made us to be different from one another, we are not identical in the practices and activities that will help us connect with God. There are Seven Spiritual Pathways through which we most naturally sense God’s presence and experience spiritual growth. We all have at least some involvement in each of them, but we most often have one that is highly preferred as our primary spiritual pathway.

I -- INTELLECTUAL PATHWAY

People on the intellectual pathway draw closer to God as they learn more about God. When Jesus cited the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) about loving God with all your heart, one phrase was added: “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind.” If you’re on the intellectual pathway you are grateful for that addition because you love to learn and be taught about God and God’s calling. Persons preferring this pathway will need to be open to the other pathways in order to maintain a healthy balance in their spiritual life.

II -- RELATIONSHIP PATHWAY

People who follow the relational pathway find that they have a deep sense of God’s presence when they’re involved in significant relationships. Jesus’ statement that “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” appeals to a relational type. Small groups and community experiences become indispensable to this type of person in their spiritual quest. Persons preferring this pathway will need
to be open to other pathways in order to maintain a healthy balance in their spiritual life.

III -- SERVING PATHWAY

People on the serving pathway find that God’s presence seems most tangible when they are involved in helping others. Jesus’ commandment that “whenever you did for the least of these, you did for me” is a truth they experience deeply. If this is you, you may find that you are somewhat uncomfortable in a setting where you don’t have a role to play in helping others. Acts of service come naturally to you. Persons preferring this pathway will need to be open to the other pathways in order to maintain a healthy balance in their spiritual life.

IV -- WORSHIP PATHWAY

People on the worship pathway resonate with the psalmist who wrote: “I rejoiced with those who said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’” If you prefer this pathway you have a natural gift and inclination for celebration and worship. Something deep inside you may feel released when praise and adoration are given voice in worship. Some of your most formative moments occur during times of worship along this pathway. (Holistic worship will include some aspect of each of the Seven Spiritual Pathways in each worship service to connect with the unique pathway of each person.) Persons preferring the Worship Pathway will need to be open to other pathways in order to maintain a healthy balance in their spiritual life.

V -- ACTIVIST PATHWAY

People on the activist pathway have a high level of enthusiasm and energy. If you are on this pathway, you have a passion to be involved through action. The Scriptural mandate “to do justice and to love mercy” under girds your connection. Challenges don’t discourage the activist but in fact provide purpose and focus. Without a cause, this person’s spiritual life would stagnate. Persons on this pathway have a fervent desire for
social justice, peace initiatives, and causes that lead to transformation. They will need to be open to the other pathways in order to maintain a healthy balance in their spiritual life.

VI -- CONTEMPLATION PATHWAY

People on the contemplative pathway love large blocks of uninterrupted time alone. If you prefer this pathway, God is most present to you when distractions and noise are removed. Images and metaphors and pictures help you as you pray. One writer describes contemplative people as having a “large interior world.” Making time to listen to God in silence and solitude is vital to the health of your soul. This enables you to connect and sense the presence of God. God’s presence is manifest in many dimensions of life, so this person will need to be open to the other pathways in order to maintain a healthy balance in their spiritual life.

VII -- CREATION PATHWAY

People who follow the creation pathway find they have a passionate ability to connect with God in nature. Naturalist John Muir called nature “the manuscripts of God.” If you are on this pathway, you feel God’s presence through all creation. We are told that “the heavens declare the glory of God,” and that glory shines in all creatures great and small. The creation pathway is surely illustrated by Jesus withdrawing to the mountains or a lakeside for communion with God. (Church camping, the outdoor, floral and greenery in church often provides ways for this pathway to be realized.) Persons preferring this pathway will need to be open to other pathways in order to maintain a healthy balance in their spiritual life.

We all have a preferred spiritual pathway. Personal growth involves recognizing our preference. We are challenged not to limit ourselves to our preferred tendency, but to be open to other ways of experiencing the presence of God.
With regard to the Seven Spiritual Pathways and a church’s implementation of Inspiring Worship, Faith Development, and Evangelism and Church Growth strategies, it is incumbent on the church pastor(s) and church leaders to employ these pathways in providing diverse experiences for all. Members, newcomers, seekers, and first time visitors will be yearning to have an experience that relates to their preferred pathway as a point of connection to God and the church. Instead of following a strategy of “mass production” approaches, a church desiring to grow needs to provide worship, mission, and programs involving all Seven Spiritual Pathways.

A descriptive summary of Seven Spiritual Pathways developed by Gayle Engel for congregations seeking connectivity with church members and seekers (Workshop 2011).

Concept of Spiritual Pathways identified by John Ortberg in his book entitled, God is Closer Than You Think, (Zondervan Press, 2005, Chapter 7).