

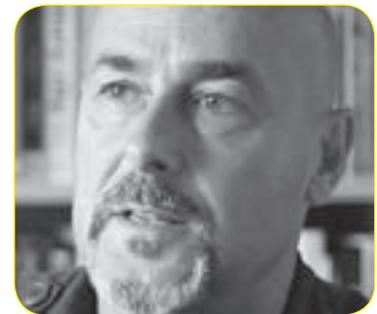


Spiritual Scaffolding

Should churches see themselves as monastic missionary communities – a group of comrades bound to God and each other by a set of common values, liturgies and commitments which will equip them and renew them for life in the world?

Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor wrote, ‘. . .there is no way in which I will have a relation to God which is not in some way or other embodied.’¹ Taylor also says, ‘. . . the presence of the sacred could be enacted in ritual, or seen, felt, touched, walked towards (in pilgrimage).’² Alas, much of our Christian ritual is highly personalised and inwardly sensed. And yet, liturgy literally means ‘the work of the people’. It is the collective practices or rituals that the people of God undertake to unite themselves to him and to each other. But such liturgies, if designed well, can serve to propel us outwards, to love and serve others.

American scholar, James K A Smith reminds us that, first and foremost, we are ‘loving, desiring, affective, liturgical animals’.³ Driven more by desire than by knowledge, if we as Christians wish to please God we need rightly to order our desires in such a way as to give Him the glory and honour in our lives. Smith points out that we ‘don’t inhabit the world as thinkers or cognitive machines. . . given the sorts of animals we are, we pray before we believe, we worship before we know – or rather, we worship in order to know.’⁴ He goes on to say that our lives are already shaped by liturgical triggers or practices that reinforce our desires, whether they be going to a shopping mall for entertainment, or checking social media at regular intervals in our day, or giving our



Michael Frost **writes**

all to a corporate job. He asks us whether we’re happy with Westfield or Facebook establishing those rituals or whether we’d prefer to take control ourselves and put around us a series of practices that re-order our desires, placing God as foremost.

Developing liturgical practices as ways of honouring God and building the framework for a life of rightly ordered desires is essential for effective discipleship.

What rituals shape your life by imposing prompts in your life to help you rightly re-order your desires? Developing liturgical practices as ways of honouring God and building the framework for a life of rightly ordered desires is essential for effective discipleship. As author Tom Sine says:

*We will need aggressively to work for the re-monking of the Church to enable followers of Jesus Christ intentionally to set the focus and rhythm of their lives out of biblical calling instead of cultural coercion.*⁵

What could it look like if churches saw themselves more like monastic missionary orders, communities of encouragement, support and training from which we emerge to live as Christians in the workplace and to which we return for reflection and renewal? In *The Faith of Leap*, Alan Hirsch and I refer to the Celtic rhythm of the cell and the coracle, the cell being the place of a monk's retreat, reflection, prayer and liturgy, and the coracle being the small fishing boat used by missionary monks to traverse the high seas.⁶ Celtic missionaries oriented their lives around this rhythm – liturgy and mission, rhythm and chaos, safety and adventure.

Sharing a table is the great equalizer in human relationships. Eating together breaks down barriers and promotes a healthy sense of solidarity

I am not proposing we necessarily comprise a literal monastic order, but a group of comrades who will be bound to God and each other by a 'rule', a set of common values, liturgies and commitments. In my own church, 'Small Boat, Big Sea', we have developed a simple rule or order to our communal life. It is summarized under the acrostic BELLS.

- **Bless—we will bless at least one other member of our church and at least one other person in our neighbourhood every week.** This will take different forms. We might write a letter, deliver a gift, say a word of encouragement, perform an act of service. But in essence we will commit ourselves to the weekly rhythm of performing acts of kindness and generosity.
- **Eat – we will eat with at least one other member of our church and at least one other person in our neighbourhood every week.** Sharing a table is the great equalizer in human relationships. Eating together breaks down barriers and promotes a healthy sense of solidarity. It models hospitality and fulfils the model presented in Luke 10 of sharing table fellowship with others. Further to that, our church eats together every Sunday night, each of us bringing a plate of food to share with the others. Also, we are divided into groups of three that meet weekly for mutual accountability, discipleship and nurture. Those



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smaller cells usually meet over a meal or coffee (my group meets for breakfast each week).

- **Listen – we will commit ourselves weekly to listening to the promptings of God in our lives.** Again, this will take different forms for different people. Some of us are very spiritually intuitive and hear from God in visions, pictures and other ecstatic experiences. Others of us make our weekly commitment to search out God's voice in less spectacular ways. We will ensure a weekly time of solitude to listen to God. We will take a prayer-walk, find time alone in a special place, use prayer beads, etc. These more liturgical expressions are essential as the spiritual scaffolding I mentioned earlier.
- **Learn – we will read from the Gospels each week and remain diligent in learning more about Jesus.** Of course, we encourage our members to read the whole Bible and to have a regular rhythm of biblical study. But in our attempts to be a Jesus-centred collective, we emphasize a weekly exploration of the Gospel stories about Him.
- **Send – we will see our daily life as an expression of our sent-ness by God into this world.** Earlier we looked at the dualism that has beset the mainstream church, a dualism that assumes that our life outside church

is irrelevant to the extension of God's kingdom. At our church we are committed to looking for ways our daily lives can be expressions of our 'sent-ness', our mission as agents of God's grace on this planet. This will include acts of hospitality and the just stewardship of our resources, as well as working for justice and striving for global peace.

This rhythm, or set of commitments, isn't just our private, personal expression of our devotion to God. Our weekly love feast is conducted along the same BELLS rule, but at this time it is more like a liturgy. We gather and bless each other, speaking words of encouragement and affirmation over one another. Then we eat a shared meal together, during which we break bread and dip it in wine to celebrate Jesus' presence with us and to remember his sacrificial death on the cross. After the meal, we spend time listening to God and sharing with each other anything we've heard God say to us that week. Then we have a time of shared learning, rooted in the Scriptures.

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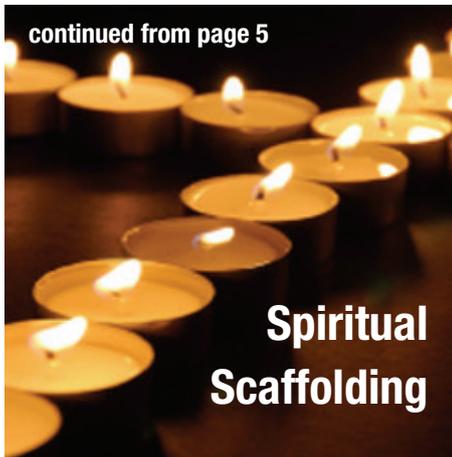
Finally, we leave time for people to share how they mirrored the work of God in their sent-ness that week. People talk about their work as healers or teachers or builders and are affirmed for the efforts they have undertaken. In this way, we try to break down the dualism that occurs in many churches, where our daily lives are completely irrelevant to our Sunday experience.

I don't share this as the ultimate way to do it, simply as one church's attempt to embrace liturgical and missional practices that help us re-order our desires.

A similar community to ours can be found in the Faubourg Marigny neighbourhood of New Orleans. There you'll find a missionary order called *Communitas*, an apostolic band living in intentional Christian community among the lost and the least of the city. They are a marvellous example of a fully embodied, placed people.

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Spiritual Scaffolding

For many Christians a Sunday service and a mid-week Bible Study alone doesn't cut it

As a missional community (well, three households, actually) they are committed to:

- Partnering with their neighbours in collective community transformation;
- Sharing with their neighbours a common pilgrimage towards Christ;
- Creating fresh expressions of biblical faith communities which are culturally relevant to their context;
- Empowering like-minded emerging leaders in fresh expressions and communities in our cities.

They do this by centring their lives around a common rhythm. Each member of *Communitas* agrees to (1) weekly prayer, Eucharist, and journey with God through his Word, (2) weekly mentoring within the community, (3), a weekly learning community time, (4) a weekly gathering called Matthew's Table in which all comers from the neighbourhood are invited to join them for a fun night of food and conversation, (5) regular days out together, participating in the celebrations of the unique culture of New Orleans, (6) regular times of serving the neighbourhood through shared meals, 'third place mission' and social service. This 'rhythm of life' is compulsory for all members, but access at the fringes of many of these gatherings and practices is open to all comers.⁷

For many Christians a Sunday service and a mid-week Bible Study alone doesn't cut it. We live in such a secular age that faith communities need practices, liturgies, collective habits, that provide spiritual scaffolding for enhancing their relation to God, to each other, and to the world around them. 

Footnotes

- ¹ Leon de Lomo and Bart van Leeuwen, *Charles Taylor on Secularism: Introduction and Interview*, *Ethical Perspectives* 10 (2003), 84.
- ² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 2007, 553
- ³ James K A Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker), 2009, 33
- ⁴ Ibid
- ⁵ Cited in Heather Wraight (ed.), *They Call Themselves Christians*, (London: Christian Research/LCWE) 1998, 109.
- ⁶ Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch, *The Faith of Leap* (Grand Rapids: Baker), 2011.
- ⁷ These values and a longer explanation of their practices can be found here: <http://www.crmleaders.org/teams/communitas>

about the writer

The Revd Michael Frost is a leading voice in the missional church movement. Both his work as a practitioner in his own local parish in Manly, New South Wales, Australia and his theological and philosophical treatment of missional/incarnational modes of discipleship have been critical to the shape of The Parish Collective vision. He is also the Vice Principal of Morling College and the founding Director of the Tinsley Institute, a mission study centre. Michael Frost is the author or editor of many popular Christian books, the most recent of which are *The Shaping of Things to Come* (2003, co-authored with colleague Alan Hirsch), *Exiles* (2006), *Re:Jesus* (2009) and *Road To Missional* (2011).

Whitsunday by George Herbert

Listen sweet Dove unto my song,
And spread thy golden wings in me;
Hatching my tender heart so long,
Till it get wing, and fly away with thee.

Where is that fire which once descended
On thy Apostles? thou didst then
Keep open house, richly attended,
Feasting all comers by twelve chosen men.

Such glorious gifts thou didst bestow,
That th'earth did like a heav'n appear;
The stars were coming down to know
If they might mend their wages, and serve here.

The sun which once did shine alone,
Hung down his head, and wisht for night,
When he beheld twelve suns for one
Going about the world, and giving light.

But since those pipes of gold, which brought
That cordial water to our ground,
Were cut and martyr'd by the fault
Of those, who did themselves through
their side wound,



Thou shutt'st the door, and keep'st within;
Scarce a good joy creeps through the chink:
And if the braves of conqu'ring sin
Did not excite thee, we should wholly sink.

Lord, though we change, thou art the same;
The same sweet God of love and light:
Restore this day, for thy great name,
Unto his ancient and miraculous right.

George Herbert (1593 – 1633) was a Welsh-born English poet, orator and Anglican priest. Some of Herbert's poems have endured as hymns, including 'King of Glory, King of Peace', 'Let All the World in Every Corner Sing' and 'Teach me, my God and King'