

CONVERSATIONS IN A LEARNING COMMUNITY TRINITY WESTERN UNIVERSITY - INAUGURAL WEEK



Spiritual Formation and Integration

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Sharon Parks, an expert on issues relating to human development and higher education and author of *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, states that,

“At its best, higher education is distinctive in its capacity to serve as a mentoring environment in the formation of a critical adult faith. Thus, every institution of higher education serves in at least some measure as a community of imagination in which every professor is a potential spiritual guide and every syllabus a confession of faith.”

Christian higher education provides one of the most fertile contexts for establishing a maturing faith. University students are in critical years of growth in all aspects of their persons. Our call then is to encourage this growth which affects the whole person - heart, mind, soul and body.

The endeavour of spiritual formation is as much art and imagination as it is science. It has been said that those who engage the task of spiritual formation are called to a “ministry of particularization”, that is, we are called to help in the forming of unique, spirit-breathed individuals. This is a fluid process that moves with the dynamics of a person’s life. It should be instinctive, nuanced and responsive to the on-going movement of God. In conjunction with this, the church has developed a rich history and literature delineating specific practices and exercises that help make practical that which is spiritual and intuitive. These two passive and active influences work together in bringing into being that which is not yet but was always intended in the heart of God. As Henri Nouwen suggests, spiritual formation is the creation of space for the Spirit to do His unique work in a person’s life. That space is often created through the practice of spiritual exercises, but it is only the Spirit that brings change in conforming our lives to the image of Christ.

A hybrid definition of spiritual formation from the works of Eugene Peterson and Robert Mulholland is “the Holy Spirit’s work of conforming our lives to the image of Christ for the sake of others.” The work of the Spirit is core to all real change, but the ends of spiritual formation have to be linked to the good of those God places us among. Paul’s declaration to the Philippian believers is that “it is God who is at work within them to will and to act according to His good pleasure.” The context of this exhortation is service, humility and sacrifice. There must be an incarnational “consequence” or result to all true formation

Peterson’s rendering of Ephesians 1:9 is, “In Christ we find who we are and what we are living for.” Our identity in Christ is the beginning of our quest to see our spiritual lives integrated into our academic pursuits, our relational endeavours, our values, our loves, in short our worldview. From the field of social psychology, we know that integration is richly enhanced through the careful establishing of contexts that see the spiritual as forming and informing all aspects of our lives. This is often accomplished through exposure to empowering messages, enriching experiences, personal reflection and role models. These combine to bring integration to all levels of the person.

The end result of integration is a sacred way of seeing and engaging our world. Our eyes are opened to a God who is seen to be actively at work in the people and circumstances around us. Fredrick Buechner insightfully describes this as being able to see through a glass and not being distracted by the chip, smudge or distortion immediately in front of you. Rather, it is being able to see the larger picture of God’s presence and work in the world despite the distortion this world gives.

Spiritual formation and integration are at the core of a Christian university. Ongoing research, discussion and exploration of these important

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topics by the Christian university can be our gift to the church and to the enduring task of establishing the kingdom of God on this earth in the lives of those who follow Jesus.

Today's session will consist of three presenters. Barb Pesut will address Spiritual Formation and Integration in the undergraduate classroom. Tim McCarthy will address Spiritual Formation and Integration in chapel. Finally, Phil Zylla will address Spiritual Formation and Integration among those students who are being equipped to foster those activities in the local church.