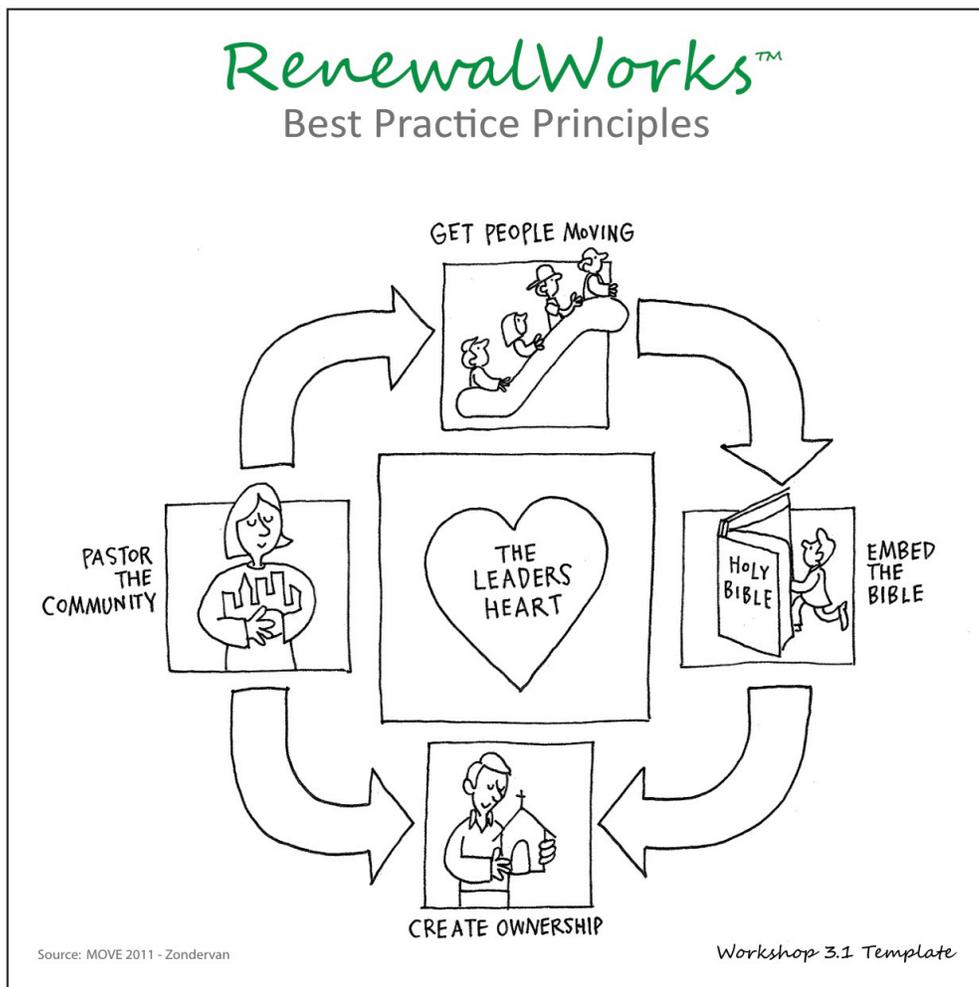


Spiritually Vital Churches: Best Practice Principles

Four Principles

1. Get People Moving
2. Embed the Bible in Everything
3. Create Ownership
4. Pastor the Local Community
5. Heart of the Core Leadership Team



Principle 1: Get People Moving

It is not the form of the spiritual jump-start program that determines whether or not people get on track with a process that will lead them into a growing relationship with Christ: rather, it is how the program is executed. Based on our review of the top REVEAL churches, three key strategies make all the difference.

Make the destination clear.

People leave these jump-start experiences crystal clear about two things. First, they know that the church's top priority is to do everything within its power to help them grow into devoted disciples of Jesus. Second, they know how the church defines what it means to be a disciple.

Make the spiritual jump start non-negotiable.

A newcomer does not warm a pew long before realizing that participation in the jump-start program is expected and assumed. From verbal announcements at weekend services to written collateral about church priorities, the jump-start pathway is prominently featured as a centerpiece opportunity and implied necessity for congregants.

Make the senior pastor the champion.

The senior clergy strongly promotes and encourages newcomers to make attending the jump-start program a top priority and, in most cases, teaches one or more of the sessions. Especially when it comes to casting the vision of the church, this is not something typically delegated to the staff or volunteers.

Examples

Colossians 1:28

It is Christ whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

Newcomers Class:

Expect all parishioners, new and otherwise, to take part in a member incorporation class, sometimes called an inquirers or a newcomers class. It can be offered seasonally, tailored to a one-time presentation, or turn into an ongoing small group that runs all year long. One critical element is to invite people to share their own story, their spiritual biographies. There should be engaging teaching on the role of scripture, tradition and reason. Understanding the role of baptism and the Eucharist in spiritual growth is critical, and introduction to the Book of Common Prayer as a resource for spiritual practice is key. The intent is to provide a context where people can experience community. The goal of such a course is to provide easily identifiable on-ramps to the life of the community, welcoming those who are just beginning to explore the relationship between their own spiritual journey and the life of the community. It also serves as an opportunity to draw in people who may at one time have been part of the parish community and have drifted into wide orbit. Many congregations design such a course on their own. Standing programs like Living the Questions or Alpha can also be useful.

Ministry Invitation:

Invite every ministry in the church to identify "on-ramps" i.e., ways that newcomers to the congregation can enter into spiritually enriching participation in the life of the community. For those whose spiritual journeys have stalled or who have disengaged, these on-ramps can provide a critical way back into the life of a vital community. One church always had an empty chair present at its meetings, an indication that they were always expecting new members to be part of the conversation. Communication tools like a website or weekly emails from clergy can help make sure that those points of entry are always identifiable and accessible.

Contemporary Overview:

Give a copy of “Jesus Was An Episcopalian” by Chris Yaw to every new member. This book offers an engaging, light-hearted introduction to the Episcopal Church, with focus on the role of scripture, tradition and reason. It successfully demonstrates how our ancient faith has relevance for contemporary culture. For more information on the ministry of Chris Yaw, go to www.chrisyaw.com. There are, of course, other introductions to the Episcopal Church which could also be used. Go to www.forwardmovement.org, www.episcopalchurch.org or www.comeandgrow.org for additional resources.

Serve, Serve, Serve:

Challenge every parishioner to be involved in at least one service project each year, with the motto “Everybody can.” In many churches, the only specific thing people are ever asked to do is make a financial donation. While finances are important, many churches have found value in elevating expectations for service addressing the needs of the world, for pastoring the community, specifically in acts of service which are clearly catalysts for spiritual growth. As people are challenged to identify a ministry to which they are called, and as they participate in it, the community deepens in relationship.

Pray:

Commit to begin every church meeting and ministry with prayer. This is a good example of how the spiritual renewal process is not about expanding program, but rather about making a spiritual cultural shift. It is about seeing all that we do in the church as an opportunity for deepening of relationship with God and others. One church approached the tiresome project of cleaning the church basement by beginning and ending the workday with prayer, transforming the task into ministry. Another church, which ran a fundraising fair for years, gathered all the volunteers the day of the fair for prayer, asking God for blessing on the efforts that day and for all those who would be assisted by those efforts.

Daily Devotional:

Give copies of Forward Day by Day to every parishioner and challenge parishioners to use it daily. Put it in the annual budget. In one church, the Altar Guild met in conversation about how their ministry could grow in the coming year. They decided to challenge their members to read Forward Day by Day each day. For more information on Forward Movement resources, go to www.forwardmovement.org

Annual Retreat:

Plan parish-wide retreats to explore spiritual growth. The intent of such a gathering to be held at least once a year is to draw together members of the community who might not otherwise connect and to explore the power of their common life. Such gatherings should include opportunity for worship, engagement with scripture, and honest discernment about what God is calling the community to do and to be. Develop a committee to work and pray in preparation for such a gathering, so that it can be a more engaging event.

The reasons for the seasons:

Take advantage of the church calendar to reflect on spiritual health and vitality. Both Lent and Advent are especially appropriate times to ask questions like: “Where am I in my relationship with God, myself, other people and the world around me? Which dimension offers me the greatest opportunity to learn and grow? What steps will I take in the next six to nine months to renew and strengthen that dimension of my spiritual life? With whom will I share this plan and ask them to help me be accountable for this growth?” Actually each of the liturgical seasons has something to teach about the journey of faith. Invite people to discern the significance of each season for their own spiritual development.

Principle 2: Embed the Bible in Everything

Within Scripture we find the voice of God providing comfort, encouragement, and inspiration. We find God's wisdom and advice about how to handle whatever needs and obstacles confront us.

But transitioning that voice to congregants who have mixed levels of trust, experience, and confidence in reading and interpreting the Bible for themselves is not easy. This is the distinction of the best-practice churches - not their love of Scripture, because that's common. It's how they execute the transition of that love to their congregants. Based on our review of the top REVEAL churches, three key strategies appear to make that happen.

Make the Bible the main course of the message.

While there is great debate over the most effective way to teach God's Word, a number of best-practice churches lean toward the expository-teaching style. However, the most important takeaway about teaching from best-practice pastors is that they all start the preparation of their messages with Scripture. Even if their teaching is topical in nature, their goal is to transfer a life application from Scripture. Their starting point is the Word, followed by application to the world.

Take away the excuses.

Best-practice churches make Bible engagement practical, meaningful, and accessible - something that can fit even into the busiest of schedules.

Model Scripture as the church's foundation.

Everywhere you turn in best-practice churches, you see the Bible as core to the church and its leadership. This includes everything from worship to serving experiences to leadership selection and training - virtually every ministry activity is founded and depends upon biblical guidance and inspiration.

Why and how do best-practice pastors so effectively embed the Bible in everything through these three strategies? Let's tap into their experience and learn from their best advice.

Examples

2 Timothy 3:16-17

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

THE STORY:

THE STORY (published by Zondervan) breaks the Bible down into about thirty chapters. Each chapter is simply text from scripture. It does not include absolutely every Bible passage, but uses bridge paragraphs to offer a synopsis of parts not included. There is a version for adults, and an accompanying book for children. One church made THE STORY the theme of its year long education program for all ages, and discovered that the number of participants increased along with biblical literacy. A number of small study groups emerged spontaneously in response to this course of study.

Scriptural Reflection:

Include a scriptural reflection in every meeting of the church, out of the conviction that the scripture is a lively word, and one of the ways we deepen our relationship with God. One vestry committed to beginning its meetings with scripture reflection, led each month by a different vestry member each month. The intent behind this practice is to shift the culture to the expectation that the word of God will be incorporated in the work (the business) of the church, and that every member of the church is capable of "reading, marking, and inwardly digesting scripture," to

borrow a phrase from a famous collect. While we recognize that in The Episcopal Church, there will be a wide range of interpretations of the meaning of the word of God, this practice of allowing groups to be “Shaped by the Bible” helps differentiate the ministries of the church from all the other volunteer efforts with which people will be involved. See *Shaped by the Bible* by Will Willimon.

Bible Challenge:

Take the Bible Challenge, a program gaining great traction in the Episcopal Church, offering a variety of ways for individuals and congregations to dive into the scriptures. As one pastor famously told his congregation: I can’t read the Bible for you. From that point of view, the responsibility lies with each individual Christian to engage with the scriptures and to find those points of intersection with life outside of church. The Bible Challenge offers an exciting way to work with congregations. For more information about this dynamic effort in the Episcopal Church:

www.thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org; www.forwardmovement.org

Bibles in the Pews:

Put Bibles in the pews and use them during worship on Sundays. One rector challenged congregants to find the passages as they are read during worship. For many, this is a most basic introduction, as this rector was heard to say: “Romans is to the right of John and to the left of I Corinthians.” Other parishes offer weekly bible studies that focus on the scripture readings for the coming Sunday. These kinds of studies (see what St. Stephen’s Church in Richmond does in this regard in its weekly Wednesday night study groups: www.ststephensrichmond.net) provide not only background on the gospel for the coming Sunday but thoughtful questions for reflection. Such studies not only deepen biblical literacy but also make the experience of worship more engaging and elevate one’s expectations.

Daily Devotionals:

Encourage daily use of *Forward Day by Day*, an instrument in spiritual growth familiar to many if not most Episcopalians. Derived from the lectionary found in the Book of Common Prayer, this daily devotional takes its cue from scripture passages and invites readers to find their way in the Bible, out of the conviction that the Bible is relevant not only in church but in the home and workplace. This devotional underscores the Anglican tradition of scripture embedded in all we do. Indeed, our own Prayer Book is permeated with passages from scripture. www.forwardmovement.org.

Principle 3: Create Ownership

When it comes to inspiring and equipping people to live out the values of Christlike behavior, the natural inclination for church leaders is to reach for traditional levers such as volunteer programs, small groups, and training for the lay leaders who lead these programs. Not surprisingly, best-practice churches take advantage of all these levers. However, in the countercultural spirit of Jesus, their goal is not to build up these programs. Their goal is to change behavior.

Empower people to be the church.

This is the priesthood-of-all-believers strategy, aiming to break down the mindset that divides pastors and congregants. Blurring those dividing lines involves assigning high levels of ministry accountability to lay leaders and using creative ways to inspire people to explore with Christ-like behavior in their everyday lives.

Equip people to succeed.

It's not enough to simply empower people. Establishing high standards for performance and accountability is critical, as is educating and giving congregants the tools they need to meet those standards.

Hold people accountable.

Best-practice churches understand that their attendees need spiritual mirrors, which means safe, relational networks that help them navigate the ups and downs of an expanding journey of faith. Many invest significant time and resources in small-group infrastructures to provide that support.

Examples

Ephesians 4:

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

Define Spiritual Gifts:

Offer discernment courses for people to identify their spiritual gifts. One church offered a course called "What in God's Name are you doing?" which used traditional practices associated with discernment to help people identify their own vocations. Sample curriculum can be found on the RenewalWorks landing page at:

www.renewalworks.forwardmovement.org. Scripture, prayer, the counsel of others in the community all emerge as ways to discover meaningful ministry. Small groups have also used the book *Listening Hearts* as the basis for this kind of discernment, in the recognition that all members of the church have a call. These materials can be found at www.listeninghearts.org.

Sermon Dialogue:

Schedule monthly dialogue sermons, with pre-reading and questions to consider before coming to church. In one church, parishioners were encouraged to prepare for worship by reading the passages ahead of time and contemplating questions like: If I wrote this passage, what would be the headlines? Where does the passage touch my life? How is God inviting me to change? Another church has devised an approach to one of its weekend services by which parishioners are given the opportunity to respond to sermons. The preacher offers the homily, and then three standing mikes are available in the nave for people to come forward and offer their responses, either questions or comments. The intent behind these innovative approaches to homiletics is to make preaching/the proclamation of the word relevant to a culture unaccustomed to the one-way communication implicit in traditional preaching.

Ministry Alignment:

Convene every ministry group and committee in the church for an annual conversation on how the efforts of that group contributed to spiritual growth. In every Episcopal church, one can find ongoing ministries that can provide the source of community and spiritual growth. For instance, almost every Episcopal Church has a choir, an altar guild, a Vestry, a group of teachers. These groups can become gatherings for support and mutual encouragement, for challenge in the spiritual journey, for pastoral care. See attached for an example of how one parish provided a template for discussions among each of the groups.

Mentoring:

Consider ways to systematically develop mentoring relationships within the parish. All kinds of ministries can forge deeper relationships within the church by inviting those who are new to the ministry to partner with those who have done the ministry for a while. One parish has done this as a way to welcome new members of the altar guild, inviting new members to shadow more experienced members. The intent is not only to convey knowledge, but also to develop spiritual friendships and to knit that small ministry community more tightly together. Another parish has invited new vestry members to partner with more senior members to learn about the ways the Vestry works. It provides, again, the potential for deeper relationship within that small group community. Older teenagers can be called on to welcome younger teenagers into youth ministries. The possibilities are varied and numerous.

Ministry Moments:

Give ministries an opportunity to speak about their work in the church. Include prayers for that particular ministry in the Prayers of the People on Sunday. Such a ministry moment not only helps in communication about the many ministries in a community. It builds on the notion that every member of the church is a minister, and challenges parishioners to talk about the ways that they see God at work in the midst of that ministry.

Workshop Extension:

Continue the meeting of the workshop team once a month to consider ongoing ways to embed the Bible and teach ways to pray. A community will develop out of the small group working to digest the information from the survey. By design, there are four gatherings of this workshop. But some groups have wanted to continue meeting, on a monthly basis, and are evolving into a standing committee that examines spiritual growth and vitality within the congregation, comparable to a Finance Committee or a Property Committee. Such ongoing ministry elevates the importance of this work within the life of a congregation. At one church, this group meets on the first Wednesday of every month to consider ways to embed the Bible in the life of the community, to teach ways to pray and to help parishioners to grow spiritually. This group is also considering what it means to provide spiritual mentorship.

Principle 4: Pastor the Local Community

Given the clarity of Christ's command in Matthew 25, we know why these churches place such a premium on community outreach. But how do they fit that into the daily demands of ministry? And how do they then inspire their people to make it such a high priority in the midst of their busy lives? Three strategies emerge as the ones that make this work.

Set a high bar for serving the church and the community.

Best-practice churches make it clear early and often that they count on congregants to serve the needs of both the church and the community. The clergy set the tone and pace for this commitment because - according to senior pastor Steve Gallimore of Tennessee Valley Community Church - "your people will care no more than you do; go no farther than you will. It's that simple."

Build a bridge into your local community.

Most best-practice churches establish strong relationships, and often partnerships, with other churches, non-profits, and community leaders. They do this for two reasons: to stay in touch and involved with the most pressing community needs, and to generate the greatest possible impact by working shoulder-to-shoulder with others to address those needs.

Make serving a platform for the gospel.

"It's a no-brainer," says Barbara Sullivan, who co-pastors Spirit of God Fellowship in South Holland, Illinois, with her husband, John. Her comment acknowledges that best-practice pastors see a natural affinity between sharing the gospel and serving those who are struggling and broken - because people who feel hopeless have hearts that are fertile ground for Christ's message of grace and redemption.

Examples

Matthew 5:14, 16

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hid...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Unite Local Clergy:

The Rector or Senior Pastor can take the lead in working with other local clergy to identify issues of concern to the community, which will change over time, and will vary from community to community. In one community, a string of teenage suicides brought the clergy together for prayer and coordinated response. The clergy hosted an open forum for the community, offering pastoral resources and education, as well as a ministry of presence in a difficult, anxiety producing time. Other communities deal with issues of substance abuse among youth. Needs for hunger and shelter persist in many places. A congregation grows spiritually when its members participate in response to these needs. Furthermore, many people who are seeking a faith community will select one based on how that community responds to needs outside the church. That kind of spirit can prove to be a powerful on-ramp for newcomers and inquirers who seek to identify with the congregation.

Interfaith Dialogue:

Become a host for interfaith dialogue. A persistent question among contemporary Christians is how we relate to other faiths. One way to pastor the local community is to develop partnerships and conversations of both an ecumenical and interfaith nature. Leadership can suggest readings and can facilitate discussion, in the confidence that encounter with the "other" provides a way to gain deeper clarity about what one's own community believes.

Engaging Service:

Make an intentional push to balance grant making from the operating budget and fund-raising sources with hands on opportunities for parishioners to be of service. One of the great learnings of this research is that spiritual growth is ultimately relational. While writing a check is certainly important, it is no substitute for direct encounter with those in need. As Jesus said: the harvest is plentiful, and there is no congregation in our nation that does not live in proximity to both spiritual and physical need. As mentioned earlier, challenge every member of the congregation to be involved in some aspect of service, since service is one of the key indicators of spiritual vitality. If need be, identify members of the congregation who can help to identify opportunities for ministry.

Act locally:

Participate in local community organizations that address issues like education, health care, affordable housing, issues reflected in the baptismal covenant that call us to work for justice and peace. This kind of activity draws lay leaders into collaboration with other congregation's lay leaders and exposes the congregation to community needs about which they might not have been informed. It also identifies the congregation as a place that cares about the needs of the community, a great way to welcome newcomers to your faith community.

Go back to school:

Explore the possibility of partnership with a local public school to provide support for teachers and students. Schools are natural community centers. Tutoring, and other hands-on service are often powerful ways to pastor the community, especially its children. And a great by-product emerges when members of the same faith community work together in support young people, their families and teachers in this way.

Best Practice 5: Heart of the Core Leadership Team

Mark 12:30

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

Discuss Spiritual Leadership.

Engage lay leadership, especially Vestry members, in the question of what it means to be a spiritual leader. Enter into the conversation of what it means that a Vestry member is a minister. Encourage prayer and biblical reflection as a standing item in the agenda for the meetings. At one Vestry retreat, held early in the year, the session concluded with a challenge to all members, that they identify one way they would seek to grow spiritually in the coming year and to be held accountable for that by naming that in front of the group. Vestry members can be paired as prayer partners throughout the year.

Create a Vestry Covenant.

Articulate covenantal commitments for Vestry members. A sample of a Vestry Covenant can be found here (see appendix), and there are many models available. The covenant helps to elevate expectations about participation in leadership groups and allows for both clarity of purpose and accountability.

Focus on Personal Spiritual Practices.

Challenge clergy to reflect on their own spiritual growth. The lay leadership should take it as their responsibility to see that clergy are afforded time for retreat, for reflection, for study, for contemplative time away. Many clergy now communicate with congregations on a weekly basis, sharing insights into their own spiritual journeys. These kinds of communications can build relationship between clergy and congregation, and can offer a window for parishioners to see the joys and challenges of the spiritual journey of the leaders.

Cast a Compelling Vision.

Clergy and vestry lead a process of articulating a vision statement, describing what the church will look like in five years if spiritual growth continues to unfold with energy. Such a vision statement weaves into the community the expectation that spiritual growth will indeed happen, and invites members of the congregation to think about what that will look like. Share publicly and remember to revisit periodically.