A decorative border made of colorful watercolor washes in shades of pink, orange, red, green, blue, and purple, framing the central text.

LEADING A TRANSFORMING COMMUNITY

Foundations, Practices, and
Strategies for Opening to
God Together

RUTH HALEY BARTON

Foreword by Prince Raney Rivers



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LONGING FOR MORE IN COMMUNITY

For me, talking about church in front of a bunch of Christians means approaching the microphone and attempting to explain the most important, complicated, beautiful, and heart-wrenching relationship of my life in thirty minutes or less without yelling or crying or saying any cuss words. Sometimes I wish they would find someone with a bit more emotional distance to give these lectures, someone who doesn't have to break herself open and bleed all over the place every time someone asks, innocently enough, "So where have you been going to church these days?"

RACHEL HELD EVANS

RECENTLY, WHILE SIGNING BOOKS at a conference on spiritual formation, a mature, sharply dressed woman approached the table with no apparent interest in purchasing a book. Instead, she blurted out, "I have given up on church. Completely. What do you have to say to someone like me?"

All I could think to say was, "I don't blame you. I get it." Because the truth is, I do.

Not long after that encounter, I was talking with a youngish former pastor about a ministry he had helped start. He described a house-sized group of couples and families who gathered regularly to be in

community with one another, to learn and experience spiritual practices that would further their transformation, and to minister to the real needs of others in their neighborhood. Several times he mentioned “his elders” who seemed to provide leadership and accountability for the whole undertaking. Innocently enough I said, “That sounds a lot like a church! If someone were to ask, would you say that this is your church?” He said yes, he would identify this gathering as a church, *but* he said with emphasis, “We are not a church or anything like that. . . . We have no intention of ever owning a building or starting lots of programs.”

While I was sobered by the fact that this young pastor seemed to have reduced the idea of church to buildings and programs, I could relate to his desire to distance himself from “church” to have any hope at all of experiencing the change and transformation for which his soul longed. I have done the same thing myself. I, too, got to the end of my hopes and expectations that church could be a place where change and transformation take place regularly. I, too, got so desperate for a community that would support and catalyze the transformational journey that I started something I still insist is not a church, and yet it has become my primary community for spiritual transformation over the last twenty-five years.

Even as I resonated deeply with this young man and his description of what he was trying to do, it disturbed me to acknowledge that transformation—the very thing that could (and *should*) be central to the church—is so missing in many people’s experiences of church that they no longer expect to find it there. These days, when people are looking for real-life change, they routinely turn elsewhere—to a yoga class, a spirituality center, a runner’s club, an informal gathering of like-minded friends who want to “go deeper,” or even online communities! Today’s spiritually savvy seeker seems to know intuitively that calling something a church or letting it become a church has the potential to doom the whole endeavor from the get-go. We can judge the “spiritual

but not religious” folks all we want, but those who are in touch with their deepest spiritual longings have no problem voting with their feet. And this is not for lack of desire but because the desire is so deep.

Clarence Heller captures the poignancy of the situation in this poem that we can all, perhaps, relate to.

So Far

*I have drifted so far from church
that I have lost touch with the liturgical seasons
and the markers that distinguish ordinary time.
When was Pentecost this year?
I miss wearing red and dancing/singing
in the flow of the Holy Spirit.
I miss hearing the familiar readings and
perhaps receiving a fleeting invigoration,
a new or newly remembered insight.
I miss being with people, especially the ones
I know well, especially the ones who know
and still love me.
I miss the rhythm of the week,
a moment set aside to gather and reflect,
to stop, to connect, to belong.
Yet it is human nature to allow painful memories
to fade sooner, farther.
Yet there were times that hurt, when my church
rejected me, when the graced decision was to leave . . .
and so far, it is not yet time to return.¹*

For those who have been raised in church or spent a good portion of their lives committed to church; struggling with church; weathering church splits, scandals, and disappointments; and trying to help; the choice to listen to a favorite preacher online or rely on the latest pick-your-own-practice app is understandable.

TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT CHURCH

To be fair, churches are good for a great many things. Some are good at discipleship, providing structure for the fledgling journeys of new Christians. Others do an amazing job of attracting unchurched seekers through high-tech worship services, quality programming for children and youth, and ministries to a wide variety of human needs. Some are havens of traditional worship for those who love liturgy and enjoy a well-rehearsed robed choir, a pipe organ, and a ten-minute homily. Still others have moved into specific neighborhoods for the express purpose of engaging with the needs of that community in Jesus' name. Most desire to be a community in which the ministry of Word and sacrament is offered to parishioners from birth to death and (if all goes well) at significant moments in between—although this kind of stability is becoming more and more rare in our consumeristic culture. But the church as a place where people are routinely experiencing spiritual transformation, where they are discovering a way of life that works and produces good fruit in them? Not so much.

All it takes is living through one church split or denominational meltdown to understand that even folks who have been in church all their lives are not functioning much beyond the capacity of their reptilian brain with its fight, flight, or freeze responses to old wounds and deeply ingrained false-self patterns. When push comes to shove, those who have been in church all their lives often don't behave much better than anyone else. The Covid-19 pandemic exposed this in a most striking way. A recent survey describes the stress endured by pastors and congregations during the pandemic as divisions over public health restrictions transformed (or should we say deformed?) many churches into culture war–battlefields. “Polarization decreased the middle ground, diminished trust in pastoral decision-making, and created a general culture of contempt in churches,” the authors of the study write.

The middle area in many church communities thinned to a fine line—devolving into “Our Side” or “Their Side.” Applying

pandemic requirements to their church required leaders to navigate a political, religious, and social minefield. . . . The reality is that many wounds have not been healed, many churches are still struggling to find a new normal, and presidential election cycles have reopened many of these wounds.²

One pastor observed, “I think COVID revealed that we have a lot more idols in our life than we realize. And so, where I was hoping to see the body of Christ come together and lead in the areas of loving people, having compassion and caring for those in need, I was disappointed to see factions and division . . . right down party lines politically.”³ Turns out, what Covid exposed about deep divisions within the church and among Christians was only the tip of the iceberg. We currently find ourselves navigating issues that have to do with basic morality, the economy, health care, holding billionaires and high-level leaders accountable for sexual abuse and misconduct, immigration and how we treat “strangers” who are also our fellow human beings, government paralysis and shutdown, the global impact of tariffs, vaccines and the use of Tylenol, the limits of executive powers, human sexuality and abortion. The list of issues that expose divisions in the church and Christians’ inability to have meaningful dialogue about these things goes on and on.

Observing this, one is tempted to ask: Does the church really make a difference when it comes to the transformation of human beings into the image of Christ? Does being part of a Christian community make us better or just busier? Does it affect who we fundamentally *are*? Do our well-crafted statements of faith really matter if nobody is actually changing? And that’s not even to mention the layers of Christian busyness that seem to be part and parcel of anything having to do with church these days. Many are hesitant to cross the threshold of a church for fear of getting roped into a new set of demands that—when added to a pace of life that is already unmanageable—threaten to completely overwhelm them. What does one do when what you want *more than*

anything is a way of life that *works*, and organized church seems to work against that? Are good Christians even allowed to ask such questions? I sure hope so because I just did!

It is not easy to talk about what's missing when everything is supposed to be going up and to the right. It's not easy to write about it either, given how long I have loved and served the church. I know that some who are reading these words may be uncomfortable, feeling like I've said too much about what's not working while others might feel I haven't been strong enough in my truth-telling about where the church is at right now. But I am encouraged by Brian McClaren's perspective that to be part of a life-giving tradition brings with it a moral responsibility to make it even better as we pass it on to future generations. He writes,

How will we help our traditions to grow, mature, and expand its influence for good? How will we enrich and improve the tradition as it stands? How can we discern its present weakness, not in order to criticize and condemn the tradition, but in order to heal, strengthen, and energize it for greater fruitfulness in the future? What might the growing edges of our tradition be?⁴

I believe Christianity is a life-giving tradition and that the body of Christ is meant to be its ever-growing, ever-transforming life-giving expression. As someone who has been around for a while, I am trying to participate in the process McClaren describes—the process of responding to the questions about how the tradition I am a part of can grow, mature, and expand its influence for good. Let me hasten to add that I *have* experienced *some* transformation in church—in fact, it's hard to know who or what I would be without it! But it is also true that growing up in the church has contributed to the care and feeding of my false self almost as effectively as it has nurtured my true self. The tares have definitely grown up with the wheat.

But as I passed from the early stages of basic Christian discipleship into the more challenging stages of faith, there came a point when I

had to admit that even though I had been in church all my life (both as a “lay person” and as a “professional”) there was something seriously missing. Amid my most unsettling spiritual questions, greatest brokenness, and deepest spiritual longings, I had to look beyond current expressions of institutionalized church to the broader historic faith to discover next steps for my journey. I was longing for a particular kind of community—one whose very aim was to hold space and provide guidance in the spiritual practices that open us to God’s transforming work. One that would foster *participation* in the divine nature, also known as *theosis* in the orthodox Christian tradition. *Sanctification* or *transformation* as the apostle Paul describes it. *Union* or *oneness* as the contemplative traditions articulate. Or as Jesus taught it, the kingdom of God *here now* if we can only find ways to open to it (Luke 17:21; John 17:11; Romans 12:2; 2 Peter 1:4, respectively).

Where does one go to find a community that orders its life around *that*?

HOW BAD DO YOU WANT IT?

Those of us who founded the Transforming Center many years ago were leaders from a variety of church and ministry settings who sought each other out because we were holding similar questions and longings for levels of transformation we were not experiencing in the communities we were a part of. Just as Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover of night to ask his dangerous questions, we found each other outside our professional religious contexts. In quiet conversations where we risked telling the truth about what was happening and not happening in our spiritual lives, we dared to express our longing for deeper levels of transformation through spiritual practices that were not being offered meaningfully in our settings. We were tired of being so driven and worn out in ministry and wanted desperately to experience discernment together as the heart of our spiritual leadership. We were spiritual seekers on a stealth mission to find the “treasure” of real spiritual transformation hidden in the field of our life together in Christ.

We also had a sense that if we *as leaders* could take some next steps spiritually—toward deeper intimacy with God, toward real change in our trust structures and core motivations, toward an increasing capacity to surrender to Love—it would be the best thing we could do, not only for ourselves but for the churches and communities we were a part of. So, we began meeting based on one desire and one desire alone: to experience deeper levels of transformation through spiritual practices that were not being offered meaningfully in the settings we were in. We said to each other, “Okay, we love the church, and we’re still committed to giving our best there, but we’re going to have to set up some sort of community outside our current contexts to create space for the deeper journey of spiritual transformation. Otherwise, we will never get to ask the questions we need to ask, we will never be able to be honest about what’s really going on inside, and we will never find the safety to risk vulnerability.”

In some ways this only highlighted the problem: that here we were as leaders in churches and Christian ministries admitting we needed to go outside the religious institutions we were a part of to pursue our longing for deeper transformation. We knew there had to be more to the spiritual life than what we were experiencing, and like Nicodemus, we were desperate enough to do something radical to find it.

The power of this kind of desire seems to be what Jesus was illustrating when he used the metaphor of a merchant who has been searching all his life for the pearl of great price or the treasure hidden in a field (Matthew 13:44-45). When he finds it, Jesus says, he sells everything he has in order to buy it—in other words, a radical reprioritization of his life. Several other biblical narratives (for example, Jesus’ question to blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10:51, “What do you want me to do for you?”) led us to realize that anything of real significance in the spiritual life begins with desire—our desire for God and God’s desire for us. And like the paralytic at the pool of Bethsaida, sometimes Jesus walks right up to us and asks, “Do you really want to be made well?”

While it might *seem* like something as personal as desire originates with us, the truth is that the very presence of spiritual desire and our awareness of it is a great grace. It is a manifestation of God's presence already at work within us. We love God because he first loved us. We long for God because he first longed for us. We reach for God because he first reached for us. Even though unmet desire and longing can be uncomfortable to acknowledge and live with, their very presence indicates that God is already at work, drawing us to himself. Saint Augustine writes, "The entire life of a good Christian is never less than holy desire"—God's and ours. The psalmist assures us in Psalm 37:4 that there are desires God has placed within us that God longs to meet. This is true for individuals, and it is true for whole communities.

IT'S COMPLICATED

One of things that complicated matters for me early on is that even as I was acknowledging the limits of church relative to my own and others' spiritual transformation, I was also trying to make church work as a vocation. I discovered the hard way that "the powers that be" didn't really want to hear me (or anyone else) say that, for all our religious activity, people were not really changing. It was like trying to talk about the fact that the emperor wasn't wearing any clothes. The idea that some of us who had been Christians for a long time were quite stuck and that some of our beliefs and practices were, in fact, deforming was a truly inconvenient truth.

Add to that the performance orientation attached to the "job" of vocational Christian ministry; it was simply not wise to talk about longing for more, the emptiness and stuckness we were experiencing, and what was or was not happening in our own spiritual lives. After all, a leader's spirituality was part of how success was measured. If you were a leader in the church, there was simply no safe place for naming and attending to the deeper desires we were now in touch with. And that's exactly what caused the intrepid little group of leaders that eventually founded the Transforming Center to start meeting "off the grid"

to create safe space for attending to our deepest spiritual questions and longings. We were seekers on a stealth mission to find the pearl of great price we had been searching for all our lives.

I was surprised by the controversy and questions such simple longings and ideas seemed to stir up pertaining to the relationship between spiritual formation, evangelism, and mission. If Christians started paying more attention to discipleship and formation, would they become irrelevant to the world around them? Would they lose their evangelistic zeal because they just wanted to sit around in their growth groups? Would our lives become devoid of any sense of missional engagement with the world beyond us? Would we become so heavenly minded we're no earthly good? How would anything ever get *done*? Instead of holding what seemed like competing priorities in creative tension, false dichotomies began to emerge that resulted in polarity-thinking rather than fruitful synergy. People committed to spiritual formation were seen as a threat to what was by then called "the seeker movement."

Missional churches sprang up that were seen as fundamentally different from communities committed to discipleship and spiritual formation. In some settings, it became slightly embarrassing to admit a desire for more, as though somehow that meant we didn't care about church growth and weren't driven enough to care for the needs of the world.

For all these reasons and more, this little group of us kept our quest on the down low. What responsible Christian wants to be seen as irrelevant when relevance is all the rage? Who wants to appear lacking in evangelistic zeal when seekers are the target audience for what we were selling? Who wants to be accused of being a narcissistic navel-gazer when the needs of the world are so great? And of course, none of us wanted to be viewed as unmotivated slackers who lacked capacity in the high-octane leadership settings we were a part of. Thus, it seemed best to keep quiet about this little community that was gathering to experience spiritual practices we hoped might open us to the More we were seeking.

TRANSFORMATION, DISCERNMENT, MISSION

We did not plan for a mission to emerge from our stealth operation; honestly, we were in it for ourselves. But it didn't take long for us to wonder if there might be others out there who would like to join us. As we quietly offered up the invitation to others (mostly family and friends at first) and they said yes to the journey, we discovered that a transforming community will, by definition, end up being missional because we have such good news to share. The very nature of transformation is that it leads to an increasing capacity to discern the will of God, which then becomes our mission. "Do not be conformed to this age," Paul says, "but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so *that* you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2, emphasis added).

With that one simple statement Paul establishes a cause-and-effect relationship between our transformation and our ability to discern and do the will of God. In fact, he identifies an ongoing and intentional process of transformation ("I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, . . . to present your bodies as a living sacrifice . . . to God" [Romans 12:1]) as a *prerequisite* to discerning the will of God. Already we were shattering the false dichotomy between formation and mission. We learned *through experience* that rather than being total opposites, our spiritual transformation leads to an increasing capacity to discern God's will, and as we get out there and do the will of God in the world God loves, we become missional.⁵

And the relationship between formation and mission doesn't end there. As we engaged in our mission, we bumped up against our human limitations, which forced us to dig deeper for the spiritual resources that would sustain us in that mission. Being actively engaged in mission catapulted us back into our need for further transformation and the interior resources only a vibrant spiritual life can provide. As you can see from figure 1.1, this is a cyclical process that is never finished; it is dynamic, not static. Progress is made—in our personal transformation *and* in our mission to be Jesus' presence in the

world—as we move through this cycle repeatedly, propelled forward by the energy and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

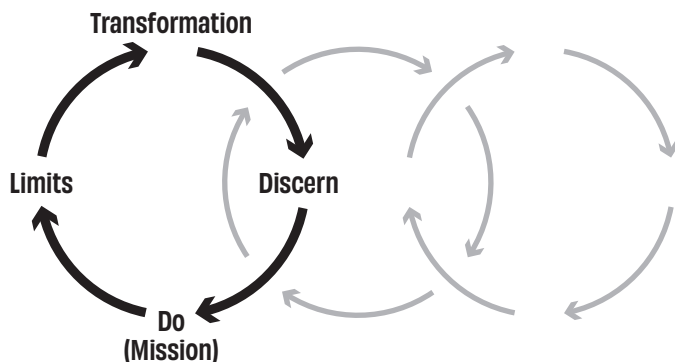


Figure 1.1. We enter this process for the first time at salvation but will cycle through it many times in the spiritual life, always being invited further into the transformational journey, which keeps increasing our capacity to discern the will of God. Then as we do the will of God we are drawn deeper into dependence on God for what is needed to effectively carry out the mission God has given us and to be strengthened in the doing of it. Every time we are pushed to our limits, it is another opportunity to rely more deeply on God and discover more of God’s unlimited resources. As it turns out, mission cannot be discerned without ongoing transformation, and it cannot be sustained without the inner resources God provides. And our transformation comes to full fruition as we discern and engage our mission.

WE SPEAK OF WHAT WE KNOW AND TESTIFY TO WHAT WE HAVE SEEN

Over time our explorations led us to begin identifying ourselves as communities of women and men gathered around the presence of Christ for the purpose of spiritual transformation so we could discern and do the will of God—which then became our mission. And that mission was a simple desire for others to experience what we were experiencing as we dared to dream of “little transforming centers everywhere”—intentional communities led by pastors and leaders equipped to cultivate transforming communities in their own settings.

Our mission seemed a little grandiose at first because we knew transforming communities don’t happen by accident; they must be led

with a great deal of intention and some measure of preparation. So we created a practice-based spiritual formation journey that came to be known as *Transforming Community*—designed to strengthen the souls of pastors and leaders for long-term health and wholeness in their own lives *and* prepare them to lead others in the process of transformation. Our focus on pastors and leaders of intentional communities was intentional because of our conviction that *spiritual transformation is central to the message of the gospel of Jesus and therefore central to the message of his church*, and leaders are positioned especially well to champion this. We have embraced a definition of *church* (big C) that is very broad—that is, the body of Christ on the earth now, along with all who have come before, and all who will come after (otherwise known as the communion of saints). This definition emphasizes our understanding that Christ’s body is made up of many members and a variety of expressions, and we want to be very careful about equating the institutionalized church as it exists right now with the organic, ever-growing body of the living Christ.

A COMMUNITY THAT PRACTICES

Really any group of Christ-followers—especially churches and Christian ministries—can become a transforming community (1) if they are in touch with their desire for deeper levels of transformation, (2) if they allow that desire to shape their intentions and priorities, and (3) if they are intentional about arranging their communal life around key practices that open them to what they say they really want. These practices are not magic, and no human community is perfect, but we can testify that there *are* practices and intentional approaches to transformation that have been means of grace for our community over and over again—when engaged from authentic desire and in a spirit of surrender. They repeatedly foster encounters with God we could not have orchestrated ourselves and have brought about changes that could never be accomplished through hard work and human effort alone.

Whenever we conclude one of our two-year Transforming Community experiences, there is always the question “How can I bring this back to my church or ministry?” This book is an attempt to answer this question by breaking it down into manageable moves that churches and communities can make together to support and catalyze spiritual transformation in the lives of its members *and* in the culture around them. This book is arranged in four parts. Part one explores the theological and biblical foundations for cultivating this kind of community, starting with desire and then moving to intentionality and making concrete decisions that are consistent with those desires.

The rest of the book is organized around the idea of living from the center out in concentric circles of relationship—solitude, community, and mission. Each of these concentric circles contains practices that contribute to the transformational journey in unique ways. Part two focuses on *solitude*—our true life hidden with Christ in God. Part three explores *community* as the relationships that sustain us in the mystery of our faith and God’s transforming work in our lives. And part four addresses *mission* as our unique way of being in God for the world, radically available to God for the sake of others. These movements are modeled after the pattern of Jesus’ life evident in Luke 6. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus goes out to the mountain alone to pray (solitude). He emerges from this time of communion with God and calls his disciples “to be with him” (community). Then together they come down from the mountain to engage the multitudes, bringing with them Jesus’ healing presence and power (mission).

The conclusion outlines strategies and intentional approaches for moving forward as a transforming community. And the epilogue leaves us with some open questions we all need to be grappling with as we set out on this new adventure. Of course, this book will have its greatest impact as leaders not only take it in personally but also pray for their communities and then process it together with other leaders in their settings; thus, there is a conversation guide available

that provides guidance for personal reflection, group sharing, and identifying next steps.

My whole heart and intention in this work is that whatever truth we tell will heal, strengthen, and energize the church in its broadest definition—the body of Christ on the earth now—and that we will find the courage to go all the way out to our growing edges where God is already waiting for us.

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