

Discovering our Spiritual Pathways

Our spiritual patterns are diverse, like a braided river. Discover which is your main one, then wade in.

1. **Relational Pathway:** Need a group to flourish spiritually. Solitude/study not helpful. Prayer, study, serving are joyful when practised in community. Large group in most churches. May tie in with extravert temperament. (Example—many young adults)
2. **Intellectual Pathway:** Mind needs to be engaged. Not helped by emotion-fuelled spiritual experiences, need mind food. Will is changed when mind is convinced (John Calvin).
3. **Serving Pathway:** Enthused and joyful when quietly and consistently 'labouring' - also attend worship and pray, but feel most alive and filled with Christ when they are an instrument in God's hands (Mother Teresa).
4. **Contemplative Pathway:** Drained by people, flourish in solitude, silence and private prayer. Affected deeply by beauty and suffering, act as the conscience of the church. Can appear a bit other-worldly (Henri Nouwen).
5. **Activist Pathway:** Need challenge and risk. Catalyse activity of others. Seem to bite off more than they can chew, but this is how they are wired to feel close to God (Bill Hybels).
6. **Creation Pathway:** Being in the natural environment enhances their faith experience. Feel close to God when close to his handiwork. Understanding this will affect many other decisions (Francis of Assisi).
7. **Worship Pathway:** Enjoy heart experience, through music etc, and long to be able to pour their heart out to God. Singing or listening to worship tracks enhances decision-making (King David, Graham Kendrick).

*Choose your main and secondary pathway,
not what you wish you had.*

Lean into your pathway. Structure it into your life.

Don't be embarrassed by or ashamed of the way God created you.

But experiment with other pathways;

this is called developing your shadow side.

Don't cut yourself off from people who are wired differently;

respect and validate the pathways of others.

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Spiritual Practices

Practice One



Devotional Pathways

Adapted from a paper by Gordon Miller, 2002

“A godshaped life is a flourishing tree”

Proverbs 11:28

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Devotional Pathways

It is fitting to begin this series of booklets on Spiritual Practices by acknowledging that not everyone connects with God in the same way. History and the Bible, as well as our own experiences, point to a diversity of pathways that bring us closer to our Maker who created us with splendid individual differences.

I first learned about the notion of Devotional Pathways in a Leadership Letter from church consultant Gordon Miller. *"Exploring The Devotional Pathways"* was published in Issue 174 (Nov– Dec 2002) and reading it was a lightbulb moment for me. As well as explaining why passionate people in churches get into conflict about 'what really matters', it gave me permission to lean into my own 'thinking' pathway instead of feeling guilty that I was not more emotional about my faith. Later, it has allowed me to explore other pathways with a curiosity that understands how midlife calls us to deepen our shadow side. The concept is also well explained in a book by Gary Thomas called *Sacred Pathways*; it was first published in 1996, so no doubt contributed to Miller's article which reflected on a Willow Creek Leadership Summit. The material is also presented in books by [John Ortberg](#) and [Bill Hybels](#), and there are many assessments available online. This booklet presents Miller's material in almost verbatim form with a few comments along the way.

The Relational Pathway

Many people who start following Jesus find devotions on their own very hard work. No matter how much they try, how focused they are or what method they use, they always end up with the same result—devotions bore them, they don't encounter Christ, and they go away feeling disappointed with God and themselves. Later they try spiritual retreats on their own and come back depressed. The longer they're on their own with God, the more despondent they become.

However, when they're part of group devotions, they join in the discussion, enjoy the experience and go away feeling spiritually energised. And if they go on spiritual retreats with others, they come back on a high, because they need a community element in their devotions—God-connections that are over and above any Bible studies they may do in their small groups. If we don't tell these people about the pathways, they may think there's something wrong with them, because they do everything their friends do but get nowhere. They should learn to take several others on their retreats, and in between have devotions with others on a fairly regular basis. These joint experiences will have a spin-off for their own personal prayer life. When relational people lean into their pathway they really grow.

They need to find one or two others who also enjoy coming to God this way. Get started by meeting in a group on a fairly regular basis, and, when that's working well, experiment with individual devotions. Private study and prayer may never be brilliant, but the inspiration from group devotions can lift it to a new level. When relational pathway people stood for prayer at the end of the Summit talk, many

Notes on using the Devotional Pathways

- Many of us have **one primary pathway and elements of some of the others**. So someone who comes to God by the intellectual pathway may also have a contemplative tendency (the two sometimes go together), be an activist when fired up about something, love being out in creation, and know moments of deep emotion when worshipping with others. But their whole relationship with God grows out of their daily times of profound "intellectual" reflection on the Bible.
- **When we've found our primary pathway, we should lean into it with all our might**. If we're relational pathway people, fill our lives with the friendships and activities that bring us close to God. Or if we come by other pathways, let's lean into them so we find the deeper walk with God to which he calls us.
- Once we've established our primary pathway, **we should also experiment with other pathways** - because they'll all help us grow to maturity in Christ. So the serving pathway people will benefit from reading intellectually stimulating books and articles from time to time. Activists can sit out in creation for a while or try the contemplative approach. Contemplatives should come out of their seclusion and party with the relational types - they'll love to have them! To really grow, lean into your pathway but experiment with others so you grow to full maturity.
- **Leaders should try to help everyone in their churches identify their pathway** - because that gift will bless their walk with Christ to the end of their lives. Simple tools can help the average Christian find their devotional pathway. Overleaf is a chart to use in assessing yourself.
- Leaders should also remember that in all but the smallest congregations **there will be people from all the pathways in our services**. Worship leaders should remember this when they plan and lead services. Perhaps we're intellectual types with a contemplative streak, and our services reflect this. But what about the worship pathway people who die inside if they can't get the worship they yearn for? Or maybe we're full-on activist types who speak and lead with huge emotion and passion. But do our services also provide for the contemplatives and intellectuals who crave moments of quiet and reflection, and messages that speak to the mind as well as the heart? If we consciously weave the pathways into our services, we'll reduce the tension many churches experience over worship and service styles.
- Its good to remember that our own spiritual pathway (or that of others) is **not a sign of spirituality or Christian maturity**. Devotional pathways are "like doors that open into a room where we feel particularly close to God."

possible, or changing where they go for holidays and long weekends. Then other experiences, like attending church, will become more meaningful because they're connecting with God on a regular basis. A caution though: building a walk with God around a love of creation is not the same as moving into a New Age spirituality which "divinises" creation and substitutes nature for the God of the Bible.

The Worship Pathway

Some people, like David in the Bible, feel closest to God when they're worshipping with their whole being (Ps 103.1-5); they come to God by the Worship Pathway because worship is their greatest delight. One business leader had attended a particular church for many years, but felt that all he got was a lot of head knowledge and he craved for more. He started attending a friend's church where they worshipped with a lot of spirit and passion, and for some weeks he cried like a baby through the services because he'd found the God-honouring worship he yearned for. Discovering meaningful worship was like a dam breaking inside him. Now whenever he's got a big business decision to make, or has an overflowing concern, he takes some worship CDs and goes for a long drive in his car. Sometimes he has to pull over to the side of the road because God's presence so overwhelms him that he can no longer drive. Worship is his primary pathway to God and many in our churches are like him. When ministers ignore their need for inspiring worship, or try to deflect them from their passion, they do incalculable harm because full-on worship is their primary pathway to God. Without that worship, which is their lifeline to God, they die inside.

People who feel closest to God when they worship him with abandonment and passion need to include vast amounts of worship in their spiritual formation plan so they too can be fruitful for Christ.



thousands stood, and it's likely many in NZ churches would also come to God best by this pathway. It seems that people with out-going personalities are particularly disposed to the relational pathway—and other people aren't!

The Intellectual Pathway

Some people get closest to God when they do their Bible reading with Study Bibles and Bible commentaries, because they love wrestling with profound issues and difficult questions— and intellectual insights bring them very close to God. These people rarely get excited at services that focus on people's stories and feelings because they're looking for something that stimulates their minds. Without that stimulation they're restless and unfulfilled, because for them, heart and will are moved when their minds are challenged by truth. Once their minds are convinced about something, they can have an extraordinary influence for good, sometimes out of all proportion to their numbers. They come to God by the intellectual pathway.

Paul, trained by the top teacher of the day (Acts 22:3) and with his huge emphasis on the mind (Ro 12:2 etc), came to God by this route, and reshaped the religious world of his day. Thomas Aquinas, who in the High Middle Ages argued from 1 Tim 2:1 that prayer must include an ascent of the mind to God, also found this path his primary way. Martin Luther, who rediscovered justification by faith, and John Calvin, with his teaching on the sovereignty of God, are other examples. Francis Schaeffer and Chuck Colson, who grasped the intellectual supremacy of the Christian worldview in their books [*How Then Shall we Live?*](#) and [*How Now Shall We Live?*](#), also came to God by the intellectual pathway. Lee Strobel, who researched Christianity for two whole years before he came to Christ, represents this pathway too.

So just as relational pathway people need to develop a spiritual formation plan to get closer to God, intellectual pathway people should do the same—but the pathways will be very different. Some basic tools will stimulate their minds in their devotions: good Study Bibles, Bible commentaries, Bible Dictionaries, and theology books like Alister McGrath's [*Mere Theology: Christian Faith and the Discipleship of the Mind*](#). If they can start a collection of such tools to help them with their devotional reading and thinking, they too will grow more deeply because they make significant spiritual progress when their minds are fully engaged.

The Serving Pathway

A third very different group of people get closest to God when they're helping others do the work of the Kingdom. You can always tell who these people are because when you ask them when they feel closest to God, they'll say it's when they're serving—not when they're praying or singing or doing other "religious" things, which they may also enjoy up to a point. A Board member at Willow Creek took early retirement and shifted to just across the street from the church so he

could spend several days a week doing voluntary work around the church—because he felt closest to God when serving. He felt blessed to play his part in many people's faith journey. Take away this man's opportunity to serve and you'd close the door on his pathway to God.

Sometimes we can get impatient with this kind of person and want to get them fired up about more important things. But that's a grave mistake. Church leaders should remember that these people too are "baptised by one Spirit" (1 Cor 12:13), that and that their contribution is critical to the effective functioning of the local church. To take Paul's analogy of the body, they may not be the mind that thinks up our great church dreams. Nor may they be the eye that sees where all these dreams may lead. But they are the feet and hands that bring our church dreams to pass. Without them, those dreams can never come true. Wise leaders do not despise these people's calling. Helping serving people to find the church and community activities they'd enjoy will help them grow in Christ and have a spin-off in their spirituality.

The Contemplative Pathway

Some people get closest to God when they spend long periods of time on their own with him - enjoying his presence, meditating on his goodness, thinking through great issues like suffering and the cry of the poor, writing songs that bless and books that stretch. They come to God by the contemplative pathway; and whereas they love being alone with God for long periods, they tend to steer away from relational activities because people and activities drain them. Contemplatives live for their relationship with God: they are happiest when they gaze into his face and worship him with holy passion.

Contemplatives may not be as large a group as some of the other pathways but they've exerted an extraordinary influence on the Church through the ages. Augustine had a contemplative side, as did Thomas Aquinas, who said that we know the bliss of contemplation in direct proportion to our withdrawal from the world. In the 16th Century, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross majored on the contemplative pathway. In the 20th Century, Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen both came to God by this route. Indeed, Merton said that if our Christian life is no more than bits and pieces of devotion and service, we'll never know and enjoy the wonder of God's mighty love. We find that love when we go deeper with Christ. Don't try to pressure these folk into a more active, service-focused faith. They're reflective thinkers more than servers, worshippers more than activists. Let them exercise their God-given ministry. Then they too will grow and flourish in their walk.

The Activist Pathway

Some people feel closest to God when they're living at the edge of their potential - charging into battle to lead great causes and grow great churches, when the odds are overwhelmingly stacked against them and the only hope of victory is divine

intervention. Moses, Elijah and Habakkuk in the Bible probably came to God by this pathway. John Wesley led the charge for spiritual renewal and social reform, George Whitefield preached himself into exhaustion. D L Moody amazed his associates with how much he did, and Bill Hybels planted one of the greatest churches and networks of churches in the Western world. These and many others have felt closest to God when they cried out to him in desperation. These most gifted activists are the generals in God's army and gather round them armies of helpers who share their great dreams, live for the same cause and pour themselves out with the same passion. They can change the course of history; Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, may have come to God by this pathway because he was certainly an activist.

People who incline to this pathway get closest to God when they're fighting for justice, leading the charge to help the poor, writing letters to government and newspaper editors, and calling the Church to wake from its apathy and get on with winning the world for Christ. Appropriate devotional practices may include disciplines like journaling to focus their energy. However for all their passion, activists do sometimes fall into burnout and depression, as Elijah did in the Bible and as Bill Hybels says he did earlier in his ministry. Finding a balance will enable them to retain their passion and energy.

The Creation Pathway

Some people feel closest to God when they get into the natural splendour of creation - praying outdoors, living where they can see great views, walking across mountains tracks and holidaying in the open spaces. Put them "somewhere in creation" and God seems very close; tie them down to living and working in great cities and they dry up inside. They're creation pathway people and need regular contact with creation to get close to God.

Many through the ages have been like them. Anthony the Great wrote in the fourth century that his "book" was the nature of created things and whenever he wished to read God's words, that book was at hand. In the twelfth century Bernard of Clairvaux, the most influential leader of his age, said that trees and stones teach us what we can never hear from any master. Francis of Assisi was another who loved creation and enjoyed it greatly. Later the great theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) frequently alluded to creation. More recently millions of Christians have delighted to sing, "O Lord my God/ When I in awesome wonder/ Consider all the works Thy hands have made ... Then sings my soul, my Saviour God to Thee/ How great Thou art, how great Thou art..." Creation nourishes the faith of millions and is pivotal for many thousands.

People who get closest to God when they're out in creation feel frustrated when they're just listening to speakers and singing lots of songs, and are more moved out in nature than they ever are in church or fighting for social causes. They may need help to develop a spiritual formation plan that includes prayer outdoors whenever