



h o l y h a b i t s :

stepping up to the challenge

by
t. ray rachels



“If you want to build a ship,” wrote Antoine de Saint-Exupery, “don’t drum up the men to go to the forest to gather wood, saw it, and nail the planks together. Instead, teach them the desire for the sea.”

The compelling suggestion is that there is a profound difference between routine and passion. How do we build and keep passion in the routines needed for

prayer

My mother prayed two hours every morning. When I was growing up she prayed a lot for me. I know I’m in the Kingdom because of my mother’s prayers.

Early in our marriage, my wife and I were staying at my parents’ place. My wife got up early in the morning to take care of my daughter. She stumbled over my mother, who was praying in the dark.

When my mother died in 1979, a group of women from the church gave me a poster with their names on it, saying they would hold me up in prayer. It was very touching and meaningful. Now I’m probably the most prayed-for person in the Assemblies of God.

— George Wood, general superintendent



Christ-followers? How do we learn to be continually formed in the image of Christ? What holy habits help us remember we are children of our Heavenly Father?

Today’s cultural acids eat away at our spiritual passion and work against holy habits — we fight the surging tide of individualism, the pedal-to-the-metal consumerism, the restlessness, the disposition to manufacture “lifestyles” out of personal preferences, the loss of confidence in creeds and religious traditions, and the tendency to pick and choose religious values as if they were being offered on Home Shopping Network. It’s no wonder spiritual passion that focuses on following Christ so often takes a backseat to mindless, conscience-betraying, soul-wandering routine.



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“Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you” (Romans 12:2, *The Message*).

I ran across one description of holy habits recently that high-

the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved” (Acts 2:42,46,47).

1. Intentionality

A few years ago I noted a dialogue between Henri Nouwen and Richard Foster, both of whom were deeply involved in speaking and writing about spiri-

What can I do?” His response: “When people say that to me, I reply, ‘What have you been thinking about this last week? Pray about that.’ ”

Convert your thoughts into prayer. As we are involved in unceasing thinking, so we are called to unceasing prayer. The difference is not that prayer is thinking about other things, but that prayer is thinking in dialogue. It is a move from self-centered monologue to a conversation with God.

“What I’m getting at, friends, is that you should simply keep on doing what you’ve done from the beginning. When I was living among you, you lived in responsive obedience. Now that I’m separated from you, keep it up” (Philippians 2:12).

It is strange that we take the advice of our dentist and floss regularly to maintain healthy gums, or follow our doctor’s orders to exercise to enhance our physical well-being, while we often spurn the counsel of Scripture, of spiritual physicians and godly leaders to develop habits that will maintain and enhance our spiritual life.

It’s not a bad thing to wake up every morning reciting the Psalm-

ist’s words, “Open my lips, O Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise!” (Psalm 51:15) as if it were second nature, any more than it is a bad thing to go through a morning ritual of showering, shaving and brushing your teeth!

3. Christlikeness

“Chopping wood,” says Annie Dillard, in one of her books on life lessons, “is best done when you aim for the chopping block. If you aim for the wood, you will hit nothing. Aim past the wood; aim through the wood; aim for the chopping block!”

In spiritual terms, when building the holy habits of prayer and worship, the reading and study of Scripture, and the regular gather-

ing and fellowshiping together with God’s people in church attendance, our aim is for the “chopping block.” We must look past the distractions that make us miss or misfire, past the procrastination and time-numbing issues that call us away. We take the long view, the view that promises the enrichment of God’s blessing and a future that begins now!

Paul described the Target so eloquently!

“I’m not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don’t get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I’ve got my eye on



w o r s h i p

I was 17 years old and in a cabin full of other teens at youth camp. At 10 one night we started to have what was supposed to be a five-minute prayer meeting. God’s Spirit broke through. We moved to the tabernacle and were in a state of worship and singing and praise. It finally took over the whole camp, and we went through breakfast, classes and lunch until 4 the next afternoon.

It made a deep impact on me. That’s where I knew God had called me to preach. The event has been framed in my memory. I always look back and have a deep appreciation for God’s presence and anointing.

—Alton Garrison, assistant general superintendent

lighted the following four ways they are best expressed:

- Intentionally
- Over time and with regularity
- With the goal of being formed into Christlikeness and
- With the result (fruit) of growing in love for God and others.¹

Such spiritual practices, among the many that guide our lives and choices, include prayer and worship, the reading and study of Scripture, and the regular gathering and fellowshiping together with other believers to build Christ’s church.

“They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers. ... They followed a daily discipline of worship in

tual disciplines. The subject was prayer, and their conversation went something like this:

Too many Christians think prayer means to have spiritual thoughts. That’s not it. Prayer means to bring into the presence of God all that you are.

The prayer life of most people is too selective. They usually only present those things to God that they want Him to know or think He can handle. But God can handle everything.

You’ve heard people say, “I don’t know what to pray about.” Or, they will get a prayer list and pray for missionaries because they don’t know what else to do.

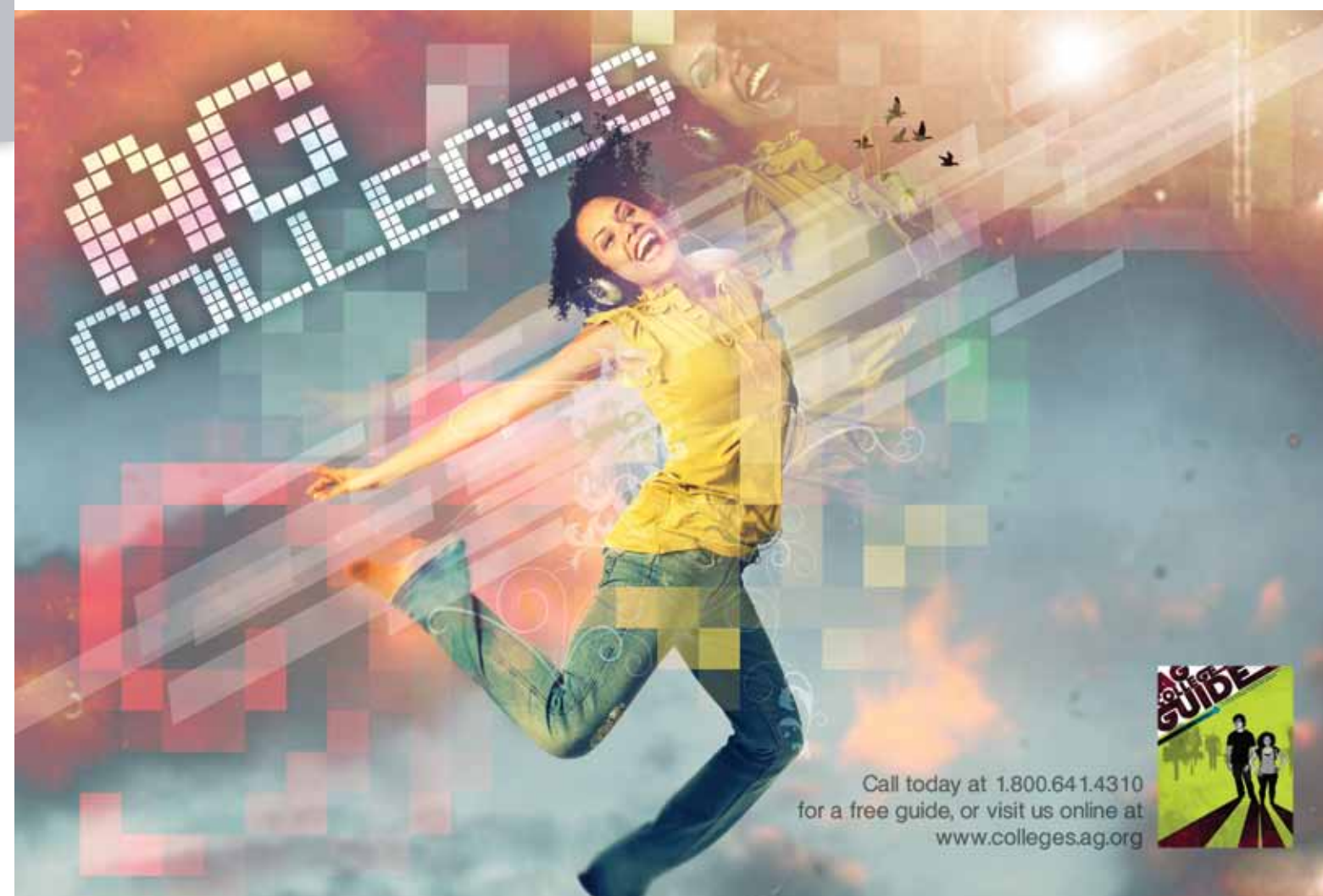
Nouwen recounted a question asked by a lady: “I can’t pray for more than two minutes at a time.

2. Regularity

Those holy habits of prayer and worship, the reading and study of Scripture, and the regular gathering and fellowshiping with other believers are not “ruts” into which a believer can fall — they are embodied convictions.

But what do you do when you don’t feel like engaging in any spiritual practices on a given day, or a given week, or even a given month?

First, don’t feel that you’re the only one. Take your feelings to Jesus. After that, ask for the help of the Holy Spirit. Then, “just do it.” Keep showing up, doing the holy habits for spiritual health, just like you would if you were doing physical exercises for bodily health.





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the goal, where God is beckoning us onward — to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back" (Philippians 3:12-14).

4. Love for God and Others

I'm reading again Anne Lamott's wonderful book *Travel-*

were squalid and beyond desperate. About her halting first steps toward a spiritual conversion from such desperation, she quoted George Herbert's lines:

"And here in dust and dirt,
O here,
"The lilies of His love appear."
She says there were no big

"When she was about 7, her best friend got lost one day. The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally, a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until

Bible study

When you go through some of those "why is this happening?" experiences, you have a tendency to either believe yourself or Scripture, but my self can lie to me. So I'm thankful that Scripture has anchored my emotions when I go through difficult times. God's Word has provided me with a biblical worldview and has helped me to interpret truth when going through some of the realities in life that sometimes are unexplainable otherwise.

— Doug Clay, general treasurer



ing Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith, in which she brilliantly and poignantly recounts her incredible journey to Christian faith. She had come from a deep moral and intellectual abyss, ferociously kicking and screaming, holding out against any movement toward her own personal God-encounter until, alone and in a desperate all-or-nothing moment, she took a long deep breath and said out loud, "All right. You can come in."

Her life and living conditions

theological thoughts in her mind, but she discovered that "If I said, 'Hello?' to God, I could feel God say, 'Hello' back. It was like being in a relationship with Casper. Sometimes I wadded up a Kleenex and held it tightly in one fist so that it felt like I was walking hand in hand with Him."

Lamott's church life has revolved around a tiny, multiracial group in an inner-city pocket of northern California's Bay Area.

Lamott tells a story her pastor, Veronica, shared:

she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, "You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here."

"And that is why I have stayed so close to mine," says Lamott, "because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their voices, I can always find my way home."

For me, that's a powerful

description of the connections between where I've been, where I'm going, and the people God uses to help me know the difference. I love this line from somewhere that says, "A human life is like a single letter of the alphabet. It can be meaningless. Or, it can be part of a great meaning."

Looking back at her first encounter with Jesus, Lamott confesses that when she was at the end of her rope, the people of her church, St. Andrews, tied a knot in it and helped her to hold on.

"The church became my home in the old meaning of home — that it's where, when you show up, they have to let you in," she says. "They let me in. They even said, 'You come back now.'"

It would be difficult for me, I believe, to put the meaning of the church in more warmly common and clear tones than these for hungry and searching people who come from so far, and who need to hear and feel understandable words from people who care.

One thing seems certain to me: What matters most at the end of the day is not the size of your talent or the newsprint about your success, but rather the size and openness of your heart. God uses people who say yes to Him, and He opens His arms to struggling, weary souls who are at the end of their rope and need something or Someone to hang onto!

For lost pilgrims, there's no better place than home! **e**

¹ Tony Campolo and Mary Albert Darling, *The God of Intimacy*

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E-mail your comments to pe@ag.org.

assembling with believers

Joining with fellow believers ultimately brings all the elements together like no other single activity in our Christian life. I have Christ in my life, but I can't fulfill God's call on my life alone. We need each other for accountability, resources, encouragement and the ministry of the gifts of the Spirit through people to us.

It also gives us an eternal perspective on life, where everything else during our week tends to give us a very temporal, worldly perspective. In Psalm 73, Asaph had a real crisis of faith, until he went into the sanctuary of God (73:17). God didn't answer Asaph's questions specifically that he was struggling with, but He changed his perspective, which is usually what God does for us.

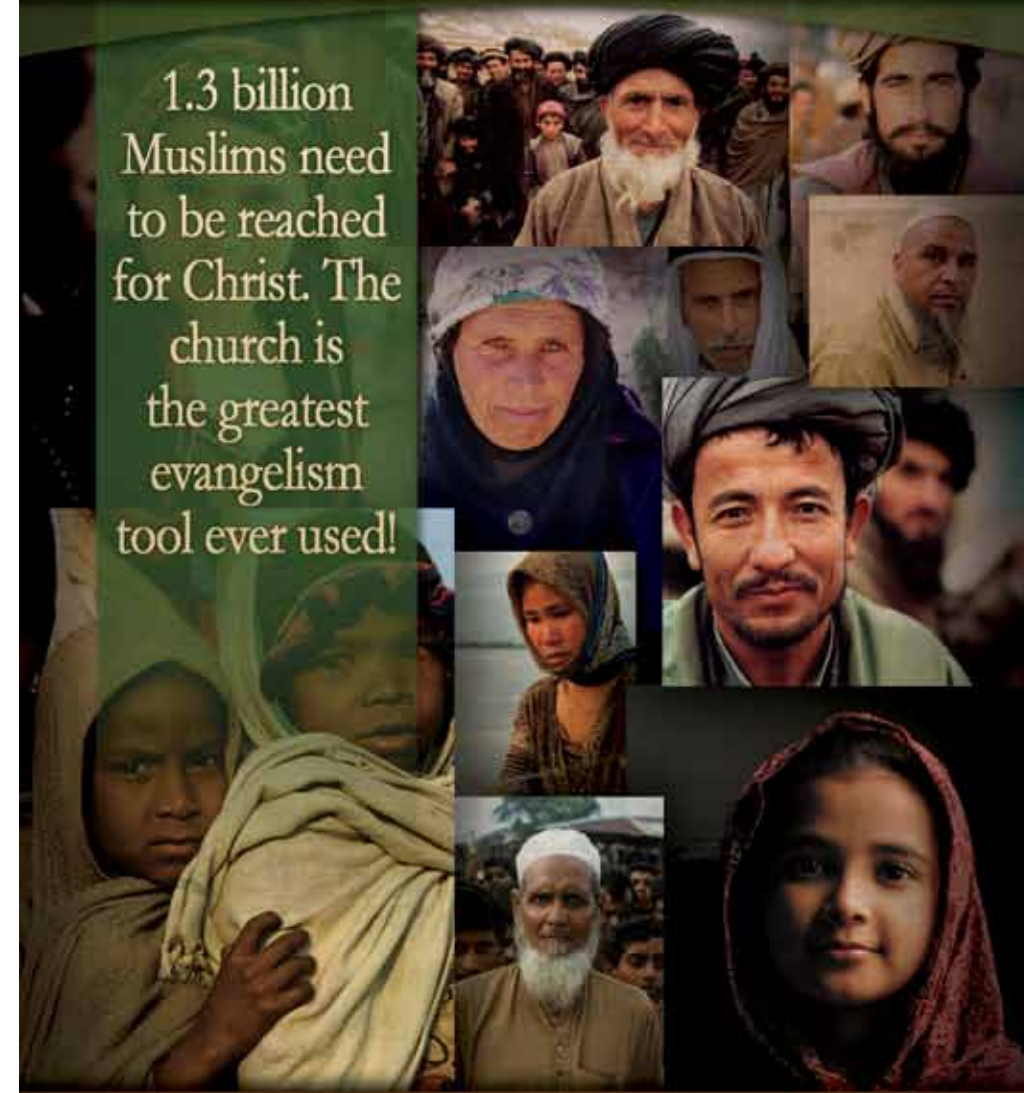
— Jim Bradford, general secretary



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