

Paul Johnson explains the process and the benefits of spiritual appraisal

DOING A SPIRITUAL APPRAISAL

key points

- We are used to appraisals in the workplace. So why not consider building in a pattern of spiritual appraisal?
- It helps to set a regular date, like a birthday, anniversary or start of the year and to clear away possible distractions.
- There are many possible patterns; what is most important is to find what works for you.

Like many *Triple Helix* readers, I have recently undergone my annual consultant appraisal. Introduced as a contractual obligation in 2001, annual appraisals have become an important part of the yearly cycle for doctors. Although, sadly in reality appraisals often become a frustrating 'tick-box' exercise, if carried out as intended, they offer real potential for personal development and an opportunity to ensure that one continues to progress professionally and remains 'fit to practise'.

However, I have been challenged by the fact that, whereas my 'career journey' is closely monitored and actively developed through appraisal, my 'spiritual journey' has mainly been one of passive and unmeasured progress. In addition, the underpinning question 'am I fit to practise?' seems to be as important for my life as a Christian, as for my role as a consultant. Several years ago therefore, I started doing an informal annual 'spiritual appraisal'. I have very much done this as a slow-learning 'pilgrim' rather than as a sorted 'saint'. Nevertheless, I have found this a helpful tool for trying to make my spiritual development a more deliberate process, with some form of 'governance', and I commend it to you.

Principles of spiritual appraisal

Intense post-graduate medical training and busy GP or consultant practice can certainly have negative

impacts on measured spiritual growth. John Ortberg's words have a recognisable resonance: 'For many of us, the danger is not that we renounce our faith. It is that we will become too distracted and rushed and pre-occupied that we will settle for a mediocre version of it'.¹

Scripture reminds us of two important principles of spiritual transformation:

1) It is an on-going process

The journey of Christian discipleship should be one of increasingly reflecting the Trinity in our lives. As Paul reminds us: 'And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit'.²

2) It is a proactive process

There are many reminders of this in Scripture. Examples include: 'be transformed by the renewal of your minds';³ 'set your minds on things above, not earthly things';⁴ 'clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness...';⁵ 'above all else, guard your heart';⁶ 'watch out that no one deceives you';⁷ and 'flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness'.⁸

Spiritual appraisal therefore, can facilitate our spiritual growth in several ways:

- Christian discipleship becomes something that we actively nurture and progress, rather than merely leave to chance.

- It enables us critically to evaluate our life choices and activities to ensure that we only maintain things that impact positively on spiritual growth.
- Monitoring our spiritual development actually increases our chances of enhancing it. The positive motivational effect caused by simply measuring an activity is termed the Hawthorne effect,^{9,10} and is well recognised in clinical trials.

Practicalities of spiritual appraisal: when and how?

I have found it best to do the appraisal on an annual occasion. Originally it was my birthday and now New Year's Day. This makes it easier to remember and also provides a specific landmark by which to evaluate one full year of discipleship.

A spiritual appraisal clearly needs to be tailored to the individual. To date, I have conducted mine informally by myself, but I recognise the biblical principle of making oneself accountable to others and accept that this would make the process more objective.

It is really important to ring-fence protected time for this task away from one's busy schedule. Spiritual appraisal is about letting God's Spirit 'search us and know us', and through prayerful reflection letting ourselves be 'moulded by the potter'.

With regards the actual appraisal, I have found it helpful to base mine on a modification of four components of the consultant appraisal:

A prayerful evaluation of spiritual 'progress' over the previous twelve months.

Looking back over the last year, I start by asking whether I am more Christ-like now than I was this time last year. I reflect on passages of Scripture such as Galatians 5 and Colossians 3 that clearly outline the differences between the ways of the 'sinful nature', and the characteristics expected of 'God's chosen people'. Integral to my reflection is a time of confession and a reminder of the extraordinary message of forgiveness and renewal that we have as a result of the cross.

I review any 'action points' recorded during my previous year's appraisal and give thanks for those that have been fulfilled.

A careful consideration of any failings or shortfalls in spiritual development encountered during the year and an attempt to identify their root cause.

I spend time considering any patterns of behaviour that recur year after year and bring those before God. I ask him to show me if they have any root cause and spend time seeking any practical steps to avoid making the same mistakes for another year. I ask whether there are things in my life or behaviours preventing me from progressing on my journey towards Christ-likeness?

An honest reflection of every activity and commitment currently being undertaken and an assessment of their impact on the calling to become more Christ-like.

Most of us live frenetic lives swamped by numerous

commitments and activities. Nathan Foster's words are timely for our generation and for us individually: 'I cannot think of a greater way to bring about genuine transformation in the spiritual life of the Church than to become a people who say no to busyness, hurry, and distraction, and willingly organise our lives in such a manner to be fully present to God and each other, living a life learning to love well...'.¹¹ I know that sadly I fall short of this ideal. An important part of my spiritual appraisal (and indeed my consultant one) is to try honestly to evaluate every professional and social commitment I have and also my job overall. To do this I reflect on the following questions:

- Is this activity something that is part of God's unique calling for me at this particular time in my life? (An activity, or indeed a job, that was right to do last year is not necessarily right for the following year).
- Is this activity something that is distracting me from being the person God wants me to become?
- Is this activity primarily bringing glory to God or glory to me?
- Is there a new activity that God is calling me to take on, and if so, what is this going to replace?
- Am I prioritising people over activities by being a good husband, father, and friend (this is clearly better assessed by those people)?
- Are my activities enabling me sufficient time each week for my own spiritual nurturing eg prayer, Bible study, and supportive Christian fellowship?
- Am I using my spiritual gifts as effectively as my professional skills?

There are of course many other questions one could ask, but I find these provide a helpful and fairly thorough evaluation.

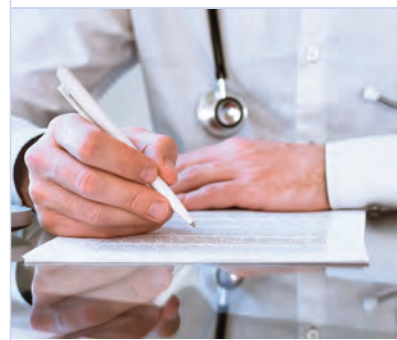
A chance to re-define the priorities and primary focus for the next year and to implement radical changes if required to remain 'fit to serve'.

Finally, I re-establish my priorities for the next year and commit these to God. I write down any action points coming out of the appraisal and develop an informal 'spiritual development plan' (this sounds more grandiose than it is!). I refer to these throughout the year and use them during next year's appraisal.

Finally, it is important to emphasise two things. First, spiritual appraisal mustn't become legalistic. It is simply a tool to help with spiritual growth, rather than something that ends up preventing us enjoy the freedom and joy that Christ offers.

Second, our ultimate 'appraiser' is God himself. He already knows our strengths and our weaknesses, our successes and our failures. Our ultimate eternal 'revalidation' is achieved through his grace, rather than as a result of consecutive years of spiritual appraisals being approved by a spiritual 'responsible officer'. Paradoxically, it is this wonderful truth that spurs us on to want to put mechanisms in place in our lives to try to ensure that we are becoming more like him and are serving him better year by year.

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Looking back over the last year, I start by asking whether I am more Christ-like now than I was this time last year

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