

**Q & A with Ruth Haley Barton  
Cofounder and President of the Transforming Center**

**Q: What should people know about the Transforming Center and its purpose?**

**A:** The Transforming Center is a ministry organization that offers pastors and others in leadership roles an opportunity for spiritual renewal and a safe place to be honest about the challenges of spiritual leadership. We exist to care for the souls of pastors and Christian leaders and the congregations and organizations they serve.

**Q: What does that look like in everyday operation?**

**A:** We have our offices at the Loretto Center, a retreat center located in a quiet neighborhood in Wheaton, Illinois. This location provides us with great spaces to welcome people for quiet reflection, spiritual direction and silent retreats, prayer services and guided retreats. Here people can leave the fray of the busyness of their life in ministry and become quiet in God's presence so that eventually they can go back into their lives energized and more in touch with the God they serve and the work they've been called to do.

In addition to what happens in and around our home base, we lead retreats around the country for pastors and leaders and we offer a two year program entitled *Transforming Community: A Two-Year Experience of Spiritual Formation for Leaders in Community* in which leaders commit themselves to eight quarterly retreats over a two year time frame.

**Q: What happens at a Transforming Center retreat?**

**A:** *Retreat* by its very definition is an opportunity for pastors and leaders to get away, to be alone in God's presence, to give God their full and undivided attention for an extended period of time.

Jesus indicates that it's possible to gain the whole world and to lose your own soul. If Jesus were talking to us as Christian ministry leaders today he might even tell us that it's possible to gain the whole world of ministry success and lose your own soul. A spiritual retreat is an opportunity for us to spend uninterrupted time in God's presence, allowing him to replenish our souls and help us reclaim our souls if we need to. On a retreat, we give God full access to our souls so that he can strengthen us for the work he has called us to do.

**Q: How is a Transforming Center Retreat different than what some pastors might expect?**

**A:** The language of *retreat* has been compromised both in secular settings and also in Christian settings. Oftentimes when we go on retreat it's a time that's full of programming, networking, teaching and content. You might even have multiple people staying in a room together so that you don't have any time alone and you go home from retreat more exhausted than when you came!

In the realm of the spiritual life, a retreat is a time that's set apart for God and God alone. On retreat we engage in a different way of being—with God, with ourselves, and with others—and a different rhythm of spiritual practices than what we are normally able to experience in our daily lives. Here is what one can expect: When you attend a Transforming Center retreat, we will gather in the evening and get oriented a little bit and then share a meal together. Then there will be teaching and a guided meditation that helps us to settle into God's invitation for us to be on

retreat. Then we will have Night Prayer and enter into the Great Silence which enables us to be quiet and rest in God's presence right off the bat.

The next morning we'll start our day with Morning Prayer. We'll have more teaching and input, and then, after lunch, there will be an extended time in solitude and silence with guidance provided. We have four hours to be alone in God's presence, to speak to God the way we need to speak to him, to do the things that we and God would enjoy doing together, to rest and to listen for God's word to you. For many, this is the first time they have ever spent that much time in solitude and it is a highlight of the retreat. In the evening we will gather as a group for Evening Prayer, have dinner together, and then have an evening teaching session that also incorporates time for questions and conversation. Most people experience this day as a wonderful, replenishing rhythm of teaching and silence, of prayer, of solitude, and community with other leaders. The next day we conclude with teaching, a bit more time in solitude and then a leaving service that gives an opportunity to "gather up" what God has done in our hearts over the last couple of days, and plan for re-entry.

It is a fully-orbed experience that is meant to be deeply replenishing and to help you to strengthen the truest part of yourself—your soul.

**Q: Why is it important for pastors to have this kind of quiet place to come and meet with God?**

**A:** The calling to be a pastor is complex in ways that other professions are not, because a pastors' spiritual life is all mixed up with their vocational life, their work, their community and even their family life. Sometimes pastors lose track of their own spirituality as something that is very personal and not public. Although success in the pastorate can be satisfying in many ways, pastors need to pull away from life in the public view at times and attend to their own relationship with God in privacy. On retreat, it's not about preaching a sermon or leading or guiding anyone else or even networking with colleagues. It is an opportunity to allow ourselves to receive spiritual guidance and to give ourselves over to just being a soul in God's presence.

**Q: What would you say to pastors who think they're too busy to take that time away?**

**A:** If you think you're too busy it's probably time for you to go on retreat! If you are too busy to go on retreat, chances are you are consumed with your work and your ministry in a way that prevents you from being able to hear and respond to Jesus' invitation *to you* to "Come away with me and rest awhile."

In the midst of great busyness and much human need, Jesus said that to his own disciples in the New Testament. "Come away with me and rest awhile." (Mark 6:30) If we hear that invitation from Jesus and we say to him, "No, I'm too busy," then we are probably in desperate need of a retreat. We are in desperate need of finding ourselves in God's presence again and seeing our ministry can flow out of the relationship that we're cultivating with God himself.

**Q: How does the retreat experience typically begin?**

**A:** Well, when you go to the retreat center, first of all, you can expect it to be beautiful. We try very hard to hold our retreats in beautiful places where you can rest your soul in God. When you arrive, there will be someone there to greet you. They will take you to your own private room.

You'll have your own private room, so that during times of solitude you'll be able to be quiet and alone in God's presence. There will be a beautiful chapel space that hopefully will draw your soul out into worship and intimacy with God. You can expect good food, and you can definitely expect good fellowship with people who are ministering in the same kinds of arenas that you are.

As far as schedule, we try to begin around five or six on Sunday evening. (You'll have to go to the website to find out specific time for a particular retreat.) We schedule it that way on purpose because we're not trying to take you away from your church or your family on the weekend. We want you to be able to carry out your responsibilities in your church and then pick up your bag and head out the door and head off to retreat. We end by noon on Tuesday, so you can be back in your own setting by Tuesday afternoon or Tuesday evening.

**Q: Many of the retreats you've led this year are built around the theme, "Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership." Is there a special significance of that theme?**

**A:** "Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership" comes out of ten years of teaching, leading retreats and doing spiritual direction with pastors and Christian ministry leaders, but actually it started before that. It started with my own journey as a leader and coming to a place in my own life where I began to realize that I was losing my own soul in ministry. I saw that it's possible to be very successful, to look very successful, to have a lot of good things going on, and yet to be slipping away from your connection with God—the Person who actually called you into ministry in the first place.

Those of us who are leader types take on leadership roles because we really want to do something good in the world. We really want to make a difference. But the truth is that sometimes the work becomes more important than the Person of God himself. It happens very subtly. We work around the clock. We burn the candle at both ends, and eventually we wake up one day and we realize how depleted we are. We realize our own spiritual practices are missing. We don't have a private place with God for ourselves because we're giving out everything we know to other people, either in sermons or Bible study guides or whatever.

When that happens it's very disturbing to notice that we have been serving God but have lost touch with the God we are serving, and we are missing the intimacy that used to be there. What used to be a joyful, passionate pursuit has become something that is merely for public consumption.

**Q: What is some of the content of what the teaching times during the retreat?**

**A:** We will hit some of the most significant elements of what it means for pastors and leaders to strengthen the soul of their leadership. We'll talk about learning how to rest in God, and some of the symptoms and sources of our depletion in ministry. We'll talk about the unique challenges of spiritual leadership today and about solitude as a key discipline for leaders who want to connect their soul with their leadership. We'll talk about the difference between the true self and the false self and explore the possibilities for leading from your transforming self. We will also talk about establishing spiritual rhythms that strengthen the soul and help us to seek God with all our hearts in the crucible of what's going on in our own ministry lives.

**Q: You also have a new book by that same title: *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*?**

**A:** Yes. The book is structured around the life of Moses. Moses is the biblical character for whom we have the fullest description of his leadership experience. From the minute he was born, all the way through his death, Moses' experience is very realistic in terms of the real difficulties and challenges of leadership and the presence of God in the midst of his leadership.

This is not primarily an answer book about leadership, because I don't have all the answers. I don't think anyone does. Rather, it is a book intended to facilitate encounters with God amid the challenges of leadership. There is teaching and reflection on themes pertinent to leadership but there is also an exercise at the end of each chapter which is intended to guide the reader in practicing what the chapter has taught about. I have also included prayers and poetry that incorporate the language of the soul to help enter into God's presence and be in God's presence in the places where you need God most.

My heart's deepest desire for *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* is that people would encounter God in the deepest parts of their leadership—those places where they experience their deepest questions, deepest challenges, even the deepest pain and hurt. My hope is that a reader could walk away from any given chapter saying *I was able to meet with God in the context of the leadership issue addressed in this chapter and through the practice that was provided.*

**Q: For several years now, the Transforming Center has been leading the National Pastors Retreats in conjunction with the National Pastors Convention in San Diego. What's ahead for 2009?**

**A:** Yes, the National Pastors Retreat takes place each year just before the National Pastors Convention. For those who are already planning to attend the convention, they can make one set of travel arrangements—just arrive a few days early—and come out to San Diego on Monday to join us for the National Pastors Retreat before they engage with the convention.

This year the topic is *Discernment: The Heart of Spiritual Leadership*. Discernment is about recognizing and responding to the voice of God in your everyday life and also in the larger decisions of life. The ability to listen to God and to respond to God's leading is at the heart of what it means to be a spiritual leader. On this retreat we'll be talking about personal discernment as well as leadership discernment. We will be asking and answering the question, "How can I establish the practice of discernment as the heart of my leadership both alone and with others?"