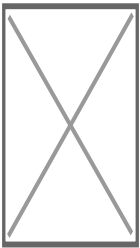


## A spiritual formation program that works

### In Process

by Glen Doss, Major –



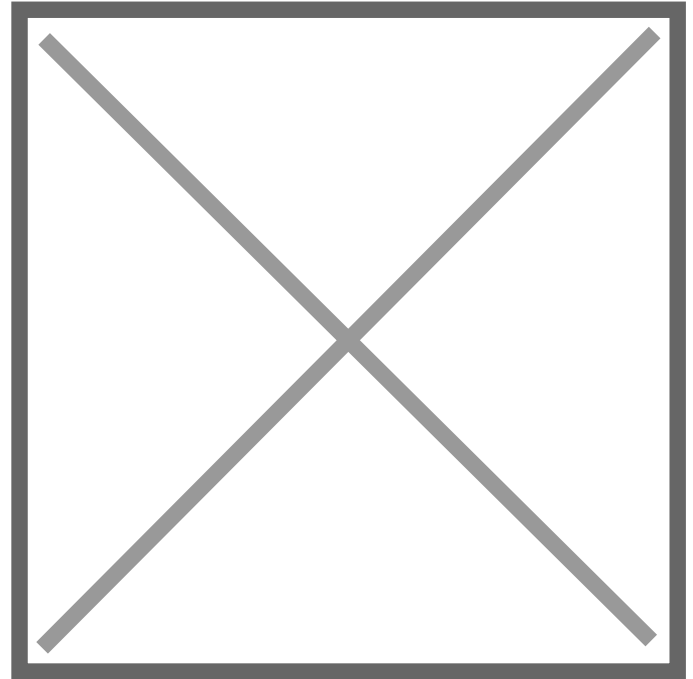
Why do Christian leaders, including Salvation Army officers (some of them friends of mine), sometimes seem to lose the sense of closeness to God which was once theirs and find themselves thinking and doing the very things they know offend God—things which at one time they

would never have even considered? And what, if anything, can be done to prevent this from occurring?

I have pondered these vexing questions for a long time; recently, upon reading Henri Nouwen's *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (2001 edition) I found an explanation. Nouwen asserts: "When ministers and priests live their ministry mostly in their heads and relate to the Gospel as a set of valuable ideas to be announced, the body quickly takes revenge by screaming loudly for affection and intimacy...It is precisely the men and women who are dedicated to spiritual leadership who are easily subject to very raw carnality" (pp. 47-48). But Nouwen doesn't stop there; he offers a solution: confession within the community of believers, asking for forgiveness from those to whom we minister. Unfortunately, he laments, many church communities do not provide such an avenue.

"Often I have the impression that priests and ministers are the least-confessing people in the Christian community," he notes. "Confession and forgiveness are precisely the disciplines by which spiritualization and carnality can be avoided and true incarnation lived." He observes, however: "Many, many Christians, priests and ministers included, have discovered the deep meaning of the Incarnation not in their churches, but in the Twelve Steps of AA and ACA (Adult Children of Alcoholics), and have come to the awareness of God's healing presence in the confessing community of those who dare to search for healing" (pp. 46, 48-49).

Again and again in my reading I find the Twelve Steps referred to in the most unlikely places. This is obviously because the program works—it produces results. But the question emerges: why is it so successful?



“The reason the 12-Step program is so effective is that it is grounded in spiritual reality,” observes Gary E. Lee, a Lutheran pastor, in the *Journal of Ministry in Addiction & Recovery*. “Many of those who are acquainted with both the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and the Christian way of life realize the 12 Steps describe what the Christian life is meant to be.... Evidence of this is the abundance of recent literature adapting the Twelve Steps for Christian living.” (Vol. 4 [2] 1997)

Dallas Willard, a professor in the School of Philosophy at the University of Southern California, describes spiritual formation as “the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ.” (*Renovation of the Heart*, 2002, p. 22) He points out there is a drastic need for effective spiritual formation programs in churches today, noting:

“What we see around us today of the ‘usual’ Christian life could easily make us think that spiritual formation is simply impossible. It is now common for Christian leaders themselves to complain about how little real-life difference there is between professing or even actual Christians, on the one hand, and non-Christians on the other.” (pp. 77-78)

This is so, he explains, because:

“Those who are Christian by profession...do not usually have [within them what it takes to] routinely progress to the point where what Jesus himself did and taught would be the natural outflow of who they really are ‘on the inside.’ Rather, what they are inwardly is left substantially as it was, as it is in non-Christians, and they are left to constantly battle with it.” (pp. 85-86)

Willard holds up AA’s 12-Step program as an example of a spiritual formation program that works, one which churches would do well to emulate. He writes:

“Any successful plan for spiritual formation, whether for the individual or group, will in fact be significantly similar to the Alcoholics Anonymous program...It is one of the all-time greatest ironies of human history that the founding insights and practices of the most successful ‘recovery’ program ever known—insights and practices almost 100 percent borrowed from bright spots in the Christian movement, if not outright gifts of God—are not routinely taught and practiced by churches. What possible justification or explanation could there be for this fact?” (pp. 85, 259)

This is a good question, is it not?