

# What Is Spiritual Leadership?

Women's Theological Center

When we began using the term “spiritual leadership” to describe our work, we realized immediately that the term had its problems. Definitions of both *spiritual* and *leadership* are many and varied. Associations and feelings about each term also vary greatly depending on a person’s or group’s experience, ideology, and identity.

For a while, we found ourselves using “spiritual leadership” in certain contexts but then changing it to “transformational leadership” in other contexts. We meant the same thing in each case, but we assumed that using language associated with *spirit*, *spiritual*, or *spirituality* might close doors in certain contexts. Over time, we stopped doing the translation – in part, because we found that where there was an openness to the concept and its associations, the work was more successful; and in part, because we become clearer all the time about why we had chosen to use the term.

In a process of writing down WTC's approach to the work of social justice in order to make that work replicable, we have had to find words for what has in large part been intuitive. Finding words is a rigorous process that often bears surprising results. At one point in this writing process, we were challenged to prove that our concepts are not first of all Christian – the tradition out of which WTC was born and in which both WTC co-directors were raised – that we came to clarity about a deep assumption we bring to this work. That assumption is about what Donna named "spiritual justice" as she struggled to give words to what we think we're doing.

In struggling to explain the motive behind our approach, Donna began making a comparison to economic justice, which for us rests in a belief that no one should suffer from material need in a world that has the capacity to feed, shelter, and clothe everyone on the planet. "And no one has the right to crush the human spirit," Donna said. "Spiritual justice is a human right." In that moment, two key assumptions about our approach were made evident: 1) our work is rooted in a deep belief in the presence and power of the human spirit – regardless of an individual's religious tradition or spiritual path; and 2) the protection and nourishment of spirit is a human right.

So what is *spirit*? At the root of the English word *spirit* are the words *breathe* and *life*. The term has come to mean "life" and "soul." As a verb it means "animate, encourage, cheer." To be "out of spirits" means to be sad and depressed. To be fully alive is to be "inspired" – that is, full of spirit.

Bernice Johnson Reagon in her essay "Women as Culture Carriers: Fannie Lou Hamer" \* writes, "We all have souls, an inner voice that wants to find its essence through the expression of our living. Often we feel that the world would not tolerate us if we followed our hearts. The [Civil Rights] movement provided a nurturing ground that encouraged us to open up and move beyond our fears and become who we were in our hearts."

Our spirit is "a creative force at the very center of each of our beings – a flow of energy, pushing, stretching, demanding to be transformed into the world." + It is our life force and we each have a basic human right to full expression of that spirit. Oppression of any kind is ultimately an attempt to crush the spirit. It is the unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power. What most of us tend to notice about oppression is the effect on bodies and minds. The effect on the spirit is often overlooked.

While much oppression is carried out and experienced on a material level such as through the withholding and theft of resources, forced labor, or physical cruelty (to name a few), there is a war going on at a spirit level. Systems of oppression that seek to crush individuals, communities, and Peoples, must not only deal with the forms of physical resistance oppressed people may leverage, but also with the power of the human spirit.

Spiritual leadership is leadership that comes out of our life force, our spirit. For some of us, that spirit is nurtured by a connection to "Spirit" or Tao – that is, the creative force that makes and sustains life. That force that breathes into us, that inspires us has many names: God, Goddess, Tao, Love, Mother Earth. Some find their spirits deeply connected to the spirits of their ancestors, of plants and animals, of the elements, of their People, of the wider human community.

You may have a strong and healthy relationship to a particular religious or faith tradition. You may feel religion is something to stay away from. It is not our intention to impose a particular religious perspective or spiritual path on those with whom we work. It is our intention, however, to provide resources and opportunities for them to strengthen and nourish their spirit so that they increase their capacity to transform themselves, their relationships, organizations, and communities in such a way that everyone can blossom in the world.

By using the term *spiritual leadership* we are not only bringing together many traditions and many concepts, we are also attempting to bridge and make space for many traditions. WTC came out of Christian feminism and while those roots are obvious, WTC today is being co-created by women and men from many religious, spiritual, and secular traditions.

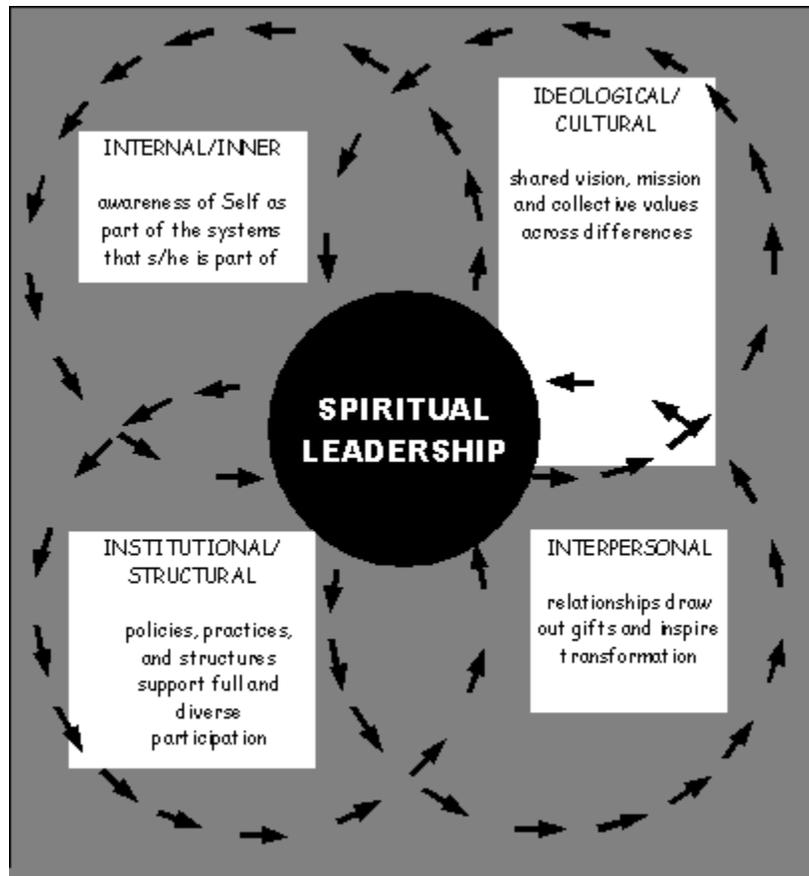
One of our assumptions is that spiritual leadership is rooted in communities and histories and therefore one person or group cannot define it for another. That assumption is made evident in Donna Bivens' speech (reprinted below) in which she describes her understanding of spiritual leadership as it comes out of her experience as an African American woman.

We sometimes say that spiritual leadership is "the use of the power of our deepest vision, values, and hopes as a creative force to strengthen ourselves and our communities, to bridge difference, and to work for justice." This definition assumes that every individual, group, and community has the capacity to exercise spiritual leadership. It also assumes that in order to exercise spiritual leadership, we as individuals, groups, and communities, have a clarity of vision and awareness of our purpose and gifts.

Spiritual leadership is not a role or activity reserved for a select few. It is not about being or becoming an “authority”, an “expert”, a “director”, or a “head.” It is not about taking the lead and having others follow. Spiritual leadership is also not about solving problems. We acknowledge that the world suffers from many problems and we need people who have problem-solving leadership and skills. We need people who can assess situations, assess what isn’t working, and fix it. We need people who can narrow their focus to “the problem” and see a limited set of causes, effects, and solutions. In crisis situations this kind of sight is invaluable. When your house is on fire, for example, you want people who can react quickly and with focus to put the fire out. You do not want a fire fighter who worries about the effects of water damage to your walls and ceilings.

In *No Enemies Within*, Dawna Markova contrasts two different ways of thinking. She calls one "problem solving" and says that "it can help us cure disease as well as do our taxes." But, it is not the kind of thinking that is required for healing and wholeness. That kind of thinking she calls "learning."

In a world full of problems, we need the kind of leadership that can see beyond one set of problems to the relationships between the problems we are facing. If problem-solving leadership is all we have, fixing one problem simply creates others, or it solves the problem for one group while creating problems for another. To see the connections and relationships among people and things requires the perspectives and insights of everyone involved or affected. In our understanding, spiritual leadership is about tending relationships in four spheres – within ourselves (internal), between individuals (inter-personal), within structures (institutional), and among cultures (ideological). It is about creating and maintaining alignment among these spheres – so that what is best at every level can be drawn out for the good of everyone.



Our work offers opportunities for individuals and groups to explore what is happening with them, their organizations, and their communities in each of these areas. Exercising spiritual leadership requires ongoing support in the areas where we are strong and ongoing development in the areas that are not our strengths. No individuals can be balanced and whole if the structures and culture around them do not support their balance and wholeness. Likewise, no institutions can be healthy if individuals within them are unable to develop awareness of the distresses they are responding to or to bring the fullness of their gifts into each circle of their lives.

Spiritual leadership is not a place we get to once and for all. It is a lifelong process of growth and transformation. We are grateful to be on this journey with so many kindred spirits. ♀

\* In *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trail Blazers and Torchbearers 1941 to 1965*. Edited by Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993, page 204 to 205.

+ Dawna Markova, *No Enemies Within*. Berkeley, CA: Conari Press, 1994. Page 45.