

# MEET PTS



# PROFESSOR ROGER OWENS EXPLORES SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP IN LATEST RESEARCH

Now back to teaching for the Seminary's final third term (before our fall 2018 change to the semester system), the Rev. Dr. L. Roger Owens, associate professor of Christian spirituality and ministry, spent a productive sabbatical writing his next book. "Threshold of Discovery: A Field Guide to Spirituality in Midlife" should hit the bookshelves early next spring. In the meantime, Roger is continuing to research and think about spiritual leadership.

The more we can let go of our fears—for churches today, anxieties over declining memberships, financial support, status in society, for example—the more likely we are to thrive and flourish as communities.

"My last book—*A New Day in the City: Urban Church Revival*—looked at particular contexts. Now I'm thinking more broadly about what it means to make leadership a spiritual enterprise," Roger explains. And he's not just thinking about this topic—he's also been sharing his ideas in forums across the country, mainly through his teaching for the Academy for Spiritual Formation. During his sabbatical, Roger taught ASF classes in Iowa, North Carolina, Virginia, Texas, and eastern Pennsylvania. "Those are forums where lay people and pastors come together intentionally for spiritual reflection and growth, so they are good groups in which to discuss and experiment with new ideas. In fact, my work with the ASF provides the key for my vocation as a thinker and writer for the church," he says.

So what exactly is a spiritual leader? Roger's working definition goes something like this: "A spiritual leader is anyone who creates the space for a community—any community—to discern and respond to the leadership of God's Spirit." This definition encompasses a wide range of leaders, not just pastors. It includes lay leaders in congregations, parents in families, principals in schools, and so forth. "The heart of spiritual leadership," according to Roger, "is being open, attentive, and responsive to how God is leading."

Roger expands this assertion by noting that one of the key components of spiritual leadership is creating space—metaphorically as well as physically—that facilitates maximum openness to the leadership of the Spirit of God. Metaphorically, therefore, one of the most important characteristics of spiritual leadership involves "holding your own agenda loosely." We all have an agenda, so recognizing and acknowledging it in any given situation is important. "If you are being driven by unconscious spheres, you are incapacitated spiritually," Roger says, "but being open and honest about your own agenda as a leader, and then holding it loosely, allows others in the room to do the same—to let go of their fear of doing so, so that freedom to discern how the Spirit is leading can rule the day. Otherwise, everything becomes negotiation, not discernment. The more we can let go of our fears—for churches today, anxieties over declining memberships, financial support, status in society, for example—the more likely we are to thrive and flourish as communities," he notes. In fact, Roger recently published article for Faith and Leadership on "**Leading without agendas**".

A significant part of Roger's thinking these days is being influenced by Quaker teacher Thomas Kelly, who wrote the spiritual classic *Testament of Devotion*. "I find his life compelling," says Roger. "He spent much effort on getting over an attachment to fame and academic prestige so that could be open to God's Spirit. His writings are helping me reimagine what true spiritual leadership could look like."

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