


Fall 11-1-2022

Transforming Disciples Through a Spiritual Formation Cohort at Washington Street Church Of Christ

Jim Black

Harding University - School of Theology, jblack@eem.org

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/hst-etd>

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Black, Jim, "Transforming Disciples Through a Spiritual Formation Cohort at Washington Street Church Of Christ" (2022). *Dissertations and Theses*. 31.

<https://scholarworks.harding.edu/hst-etd/31>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Harding School of Theology at Scholar Works at Harding. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations and Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholar Works at Harding. For more information, please contact scholarworks@harding.edu.



TRANSFORMING DISCIPLES THROUGH A SPIRITUAL FORMATION COHORT
AT WASHINGTON STREET CHURCH OF CHRIST

A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of

Harding School of Theology

Memphis, Tennessee

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Ministry

By

Jim Black

November 2022

Chair _____

Reader _____

Reader _____

Dean _____

Date Approved _____

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

1. SPIRITUAL FORMATION, DISCIPLESHIP, AND THE LOCAL CHURCH.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Ministry Context.....	4
Review of Related Literature.....	5
Theological Reflection.....	13
Methodology.....	17
Limitations and Delimitations.....	22
Outline of the Dissertation.....	22
2. A THEOLOGY OF DISCIPLESHIP AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION.....	24
Christian Spirituality.....	24
The Relationship of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation.....	27
The Process of Spiritual Formation.....	33
Theological Conclusions.....	47
3. METHODOLOGY: CONDUCTING A SPIRITUAL FORMATION COHORT.....	49
Design Phase.....	50
Implementation Phase.....	54
The Curriculum.....	55
Session One.....	55
Session Two.....	59
Session Three.....	64
Session Four.....	65
Session Five.....	70
Session Six.....	71
Session Seven.....	74
Session Eight.....	78
Session Nine.....	81
Evaluation and Assessment Phase.....	84
Conclusion.....	84
4. EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT: MEASURING SPIRITUAL GROWTH.....	86
Evaluating the Design and Implementation.....	87
Format and Recruitment.....	87
Duration and Session Times.....	89
The Disciplines.....	92
The Assessment Tools.....	92
Evaluating the Quantitative Data.....	96

Evaluating the Qualitative Feedback	104
Summary of Results	109
Conclusion	111
 5. CONCLUSION: REFLECTING BACK AND LOOKING AHEAD	 113
Reflection	114
Future Considerations	119
Acknowledgments and Final Thoughts	120
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 122
 APPENDIX	 127
1. Appendix A: Definitions of Spiritual Formation	127
2. Appendix B: Spiritual Formation Assessment Survey	129
3. Appendix C: Cohort Feedback Questionnaire	130
4. Appendix D: Spiritual Disciplines Preference Test (prepared by Mark Adams)	131
5. Appendix E: Informed Consent Form	135
6. Appendix F: The Curriculum- <i>Formatio: The Invitation to a Journey</i>	136

Chapter One

SPIRITUAL FORMATION, DISCIPLESHIP, AND THE LOCAL CHURCH

“Superficiality is the curse of our age,” writes Richard Foster in his classic work on spiritual formation, *Celebration of Discipline*. “The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.”¹ Indeed, the need for deeply formed, spiritually mature disciples of Jesus could not be greater today. James Wilhoit believes producing such disciples must become a greater priority for the church. “Spiritual formation is *the* task of the church. Period,” he emphasizes.² Wilhoit points to the great commission (Matt. 28:19-20) and suggests this central task, “to make disciples,” is the underlying principle that should compel churches to be more intentional about spiritual formation. “The church was formed to form.”³ Spiritual formation, however, has not been a priority for many churches.

Statement of the Problem

The leaders at Washington Street Church of Christ agree that spiritual formation must become a greater priority for the congregation. There has not been sufficient effort placed on intentionally forming disciples nor has there been adequate assessment as to how the congregation is doing at this most important task of spiritual formation.

This has not been for lack of programming. There are plenty of programs and activities in which to participate: weekly worship services; Bible classes; fellowship

¹ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, Special Anniversary Edition. (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 2018), 1.

² James Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as If the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ Through Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 15.

³ Ibid.

gatherings; small group meetings; specialized ministries for children, youth, young adults, men, and women; and opportunities to be involved in short-term missions both domestically and abroad. Even with all these activities, intentional spiritual formation is lacking.

Recent studies have revealed that active participation in the various activities of a church, does not necessarily produce spiritually mature disciples of Christ. Greg L. Hawkins, Cally Parkinson, and Eric Arnson's research, published initially through the Willow Creek organization in 2007 and later expanded upon in further publications, proposes that spiritual maturity does not automatically occur simply through active participation in programs and activities of the church. This is true even for those who are most active in those programs.⁴ This was a significant finding and one which the leaders at Washington Street have found to be true as well. There must be greater, intentional effort towards helping members, disciples of Jesus, grow towards greater maturity in Christ.

The purpose of this project was to develop an intentional program that will facilitate spiritual growth and lead to greater spiritual maturity among the members of the Washington Street Church of Christ. The intent was to educate, equip, and transform disciples toward greater maturity in Christ. I utilized the format of a small group and drew upon the rich tradition of Christian spirituality to inform the curriculum. The program had three goals. One, I wanted participants to come away with a greater understanding of the process of spiritual formation. Two, I wanted to equip members

⁴ Greg L Hawkins et al., *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2007), 31.

with spiritually formative practices which they would be able to continue practicing on their own after the project was completed. Three, I wanted to facilitate spiritual growth in each participant.

I chose to adopt the format of a small group cohort and build off the work of Timothy Gunnells to accomplish these goals. Gunnells' research project set similar goals and utilized a small group approach. He found the small group model to be an effective means of mentoring church members in spiritual formation and was also reproducible in his congregational setting.⁵

I developed the curriculum for this group by looking at key spiritual practices highlighted by Hawkins and Parkinson in the *Reveal/Move* research. They identified twenty-five "catalysts" that they found to increase spiritual maturity among church members. I chose four of the most influential practices: (1) Bible study; (2) meditative reading; (3) prayer; and (4) serving together.⁶ I chose these because I believed they would be familiar to our church members and be well received. I also could present new approaches to these disciplines that would deepen participants' understanding and appreciation for them.

Though I did not select the same disciplines as Gunnells, I did follow his method of engaging each discipline through instruction, group practice, sharing together, and "take-home" assignments.⁷ I spent each session both teaching the key concepts of each

⁵ Tim Gunnells, "Forming Leaders Through Spiritual Disciplines" (D. Min. diss., Harding School of Theology, 2010), 14.

⁶ Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 123.

⁷ Gunnells chose the disciplines of *solitude, hospitality, contemplative Bible reading, and prayer* because these were practices Jesus engaged in during his ministry. Gunnells, "Forming Leaders Through Spiritual Disciplines," 14.

discipline and practicing them together. I knew it would be important to practice them together, not simply talk about them.

Ministry Context

The Washington Street Church of Christ is located in Fayetteville, Tennessee, and traces its roots to “about the year 1835” when settlers moved into what is now Lincoln County and established a congregation of “primitive Christians,” according to our oldest church membership directory (1911).⁸ A host of well-known evangelists from among churches of Christ in the early twentieth century are known to have preached to the congregation including Tolbert Fanning, David Lipscomb, and T.B. Larimore. The church, thus, has a longstanding presence and strong reputation in the community and among fellow Churches of Christ. Washington Street is also among the largest of churches in the community. Around two hundred and fifty regularly gather for worship each Sunday.⁹ I have served as the preaching minister since December 2001 on a ministry staff which also includes a full-time youth minister and a part-time children’s director. The congregation was led by three elders at the time of this project and served by twelve deacons. I stepped down in June 2022 to take a new position with Eastern European Mission just as I was finishing the implementation phase of this project.¹⁰

The idea for this project sprang from a year the congregation spent focusing on the theme of spiritual growth. In 2017, the congregation spent the year focused on the

⁸ “A Brief History of the Church of Christ in Fayetteville, TN.” Washington Street Church Directory, 1911.

⁹ Church Records indicate more on the membership rolls, but the weekly attendance is given to indicate the active membership.

¹⁰ For more information about Eastern European Mission (EEM), see www.eem.org.

theme “Growing for Him.” It was a rich year of Bible study, small group discussions, and an introduction to spiritual disciplines in a general way. The congregation’s existing small groups were dubbed “Spiritual Life Groups” for the year and became the primary context in which these teachings took place. When the year was complete, we asked ourselves, “Did it work? Were we successful at spurring spiritual growth among our members?” Our leadership did not know how to answer that question. I could offer little help. Indeed, how does a church evaluate spiritual growth or maturity? This is a difficult, but important, question. John Ortberg has noted:

It’s hard to imagine something more difficult to gauge or measure than spiritual growth. Yet there is only one thing I can think of more foolish than trying to gauge spiritual growth. And that is: not trying to gauge it.¹¹

This project sought to build upon efforts begun in 2017 with a more intentional and thoughtful approach, while also seeking to better assess the growth taking place.

A Review of Related Literature

The primary literature which informed this project will be discussed in three categories: (1) works that informed the theological framework; (2) works that informed the development of the curriculum for the cohort; and (3) resources that contributed to the development of the assessment tools.

Towards a Theological Framework

James W. Thompson provides an essential framework for understanding the language of spiritual formation through two helpful resources that both delve into Pauline theology of spiritual formation, *Moral Formation According to Paul: The Context and*

¹¹ Quoted in Greg. L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson. *Follow Me: What’s Next for You?* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2008), 3.

*Coherence of Pauline Ethics and The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ.*¹² Thompson contends that the language of spiritual formation is essentially Pauline. While the term itself does not appear in Scripture, the concept derives from language Paul employed and theology he developed throughout his letters.

Greg Ogden, in his work *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time*, helps to clarify this point.¹³ He notes that the terminology of *disciple*, *discipleship*, and *disciple-making* is primarily language used by Jesus and his disciples in the gospels and Acts. Paul, in contrast, prefers the language of *formation* and *being formed*, often couching it in the terminology of parenting.

Dallas Willard has been an extremely influential thinker and author in the field of spiritual formation. Both *The Divine Conspiracy* and *Renovation of the Heart* are foundational to understanding the transformational nature of spiritual formation.¹⁴ Willard argues that spiritual formation should transform the individual and shape one's character. In another work, *The Great Omission*, Willard laments the fact that, while the church's great commission is to "make disciples," the church has too often settled for "making Christians." For Willard, "disciples" are those whose commitment to Christ is evidenced by a transformed life. He uses the more general term "Christian" to refer to

¹² James W. Thompson, *Moral Formation According to Paul: The Context and Coherence of Pauline Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011); James W. Thompson, *The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).

¹³ Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time*, Revised and expanded. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016), 95.

¹⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1998); Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress Publishing Group, 2002).

those who may be “church-goers” but whose lives have not exhibited the sort of spiritual transformation one might hope to find in a follower of Jesus. The church’s lack of focus on making disciples, according to Willard, is its “great omission.”¹⁵ Willard provides an insightful contrast helpful in clarifying the goal of spiritual formation. The goal of the Christian life is not simply to agree to the gospel, but to be transformed by it.

Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality, by Bradley P. Holt, traces the history of Christian spirituality and provides helpful insight into the origins of some of the disciplines themselves.¹⁶ Holt is also helpful in providing a historical background for the study of spirituality, as is Samuel M. Powell’s *A Theology of Christian Spirituality*.¹⁷ Powell further clarifies the terminology utilized in the literature, as the term spirituality often means different things to different people. Evan Howard brings clarity to the meaning of Christian spirituality in *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape our Souls*.¹⁸

Mark Powell, John Mark Hicks, and Greg McKinzie connect the ideas of discipleship and spiritual formation in their recent book, *Discipleship in Community*, while also calling for a renewed commitment to intentional discipleship in Churches of Christ. Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie highlight the need for community as the context

¹⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’ Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2006).

¹⁶ Bradley P. Holt, *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality*, Third edition. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017).

¹⁷ Samuel M. Powell, *A Theology of Christian Spirituality* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Evan B. Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 6.

within which formation takes place.¹⁹ James Wilhoit’s *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered* also emphasizes the essential role that community plays in the process of spiritual formation.²⁰ Spiritual formation happens, if it happens at all, as a result of the spiritually impactful relationships formed within the community of the church. The curriculum developed for this project, as well as the context of the small group cohort, was designed with community as an essential element.

Three resources informed the formation and implementation of the small group. They were, *The Big Book of Small Groups* by Jeffrey Arnold and *Building a Church of Small Groups* by Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson.²¹ It was important, for the success of the cohort, that I, as the facilitator, give proper attention to developing good group dynamics and conducting the group sessions according to best practices for small groups. Within the context of a small group, Mark Scandrette emphasizes the importance of *praxis* in developing discipleship curriculum in his work, *Practicing the Way of Jesus: Life Together in the Kingdom of Love*.²² For him, opportunities to put Christian practices into action, to *do* things and not just *talk* about them, are essential to forming disciples. He calls his disciple-making groups, “Jesus *dojos*” for that reason.²³ His work greatly

¹⁹ Mark E. Powell, John Mark Hicks, and Greg McKinzie, *Discipleship in Community: A Theological Vision for the Future* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2020).

²⁰ Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as If the Church Mattered*, 15.

²¹ Jeffrey Arnold, *The Big Book of Small Groups* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1991); Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001).

²² Mark Scandrette, *Practicing the Way of Jesus: Life Together in the Kingdom of Love* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

²³ *Ibid.*, 14.

influenced my decision to design this project with the context of a small group rather than a traditional classroom setting.

Several journal articles and introductory chapters in compilation volumes also contribute to the theological foundation of spiritual formation. John Dettoni's "What is Spiritual Formation?" in *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Spiritual Formation* identifies several helpful biblical references on which to build, as does James Samra's "A Biblical View of Discipleship."²⁴ Dwight J. Zscheille discusses spiritual formation within the context of the mission of the church in "A Missional Theology of Spiritual Formation" in the larger volume which he also edits, *Cultivating Sent Communities*.²⁵ Jeffrey P. Greenman, in his introduction to *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, co-edited by George Kalantzis, outlines his objective to focus not only on fundamental, biblical-theological questions about the purpose of spiritual formation and why it must be pursued, but also includes a section on the spiritual practices themselves.²⁶ This work also contributed to the development of the curriculum material.

Towards Curriculum Development

The framework for the curriculum was informed most significantly by the research from the Willow Creek Association and published in a series of books, notably,

²⁴ John M. Dettoni, "What Is Spiritual Formation?," in *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994); James G. Samra, "A Biblical View of Discipleship," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160, no. 638 (June 2003): 219–234.

²⁵ Dwight J. Zscheille, ed., "A Missional Theology of Spiritual Formation," in *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation*, Missional Church Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

²⁶ Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis, eds., *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010).

Reveal: Where are You?, Follow Me, and culminating in *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth*.²⁷ Hawkins' and Parkinson's research was helpful in two significant ways. First, it provided a basic framework for understanding the process of spiritual formation. They identify four distinct stages of spiritual growth: (1) exploring Christ; (2) growing in Christ; (3) being close to Christ; and (4) being Christ-centered.

Second, and even more instructive, Hawkins and Parkinson identify twenty-five "key catalysts," which they found moved disciples from one stage to the next. These catalysts fell into four categories: (1) spiritual beliefs; (2) various church activities; (3) personal spiritual practices; and (4) spiritual activities conducted with others.²⁸ I chose four of the top catalysts to focus on for this project: (1) Bible study; (2) prayer; (3) meditative reading; (4) serving others. I believed these would be well received by the members of the congregation and also provide good opportunities to delve further into their practice.

Adele Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* has been another essential and practical resource.²⁹ Calhoun's focus is not only to provide her readers with knowledge of these disciplines, but also with instruction on how to practice them. Calhoun describes dozens of specific disciplines, many of which are specifically named by Hawkins and Parkinson as catalysts for growth. I drew heavily from Calhoun's simple and practical instruction in sharing with the cohort each of the practices. Richard Foster's A

²⁷ Hawkins et al., *Reveal*; Greg L Hawkins et al., *Follow Me: What's Next for You?* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2008); Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*.

²⁸ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 123.

²⁹ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*, Revised and Expanded Edition. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

Celebration of Discipline, considered a classic in the field, also provided very practical guidance in the exercise of the disciplines.³⁰ M. Robert Mulholland's *Invitation to a Journey*, updated and revised by Ruth Haley Barton, and Marjorie Thompson's *Soul Feast* also provided rich instructive material relative to the spiritual practices themselves.³¹

There are several good works from within the Stone-Campbell movement that deepened my understanding of spirituality. Darryl Tippens' *Pilgrim Heart: The Way of Jesus in Everyday Life* provides rich historical context as well as insightful background information relative to fifteen different disciplines.³² *Living God's Love: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality* by Gary Holloway and Earl Lavender is an excellent introductory treatment about spiritual formation.³³ Late in the implementation phase, I decided to follow Gunnell's example and gift each group member with copies of Holloway and Lavender's book as a way to thank them for their participation. Two other books provided great resources for the specific discipline of prayer, *Leaning into God's Embrace: A Guidebook for Contemplative Prayer* by Jackie L. Halstead and *Pray Like*

³⁰ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*.

³¹ M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation*, ed. R. Ruth Barton, Revised and Expanded. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016); Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, Revised Edition. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014).

³² Darryl L Tippens, *Pilgrim Heart: The Way of Jesus in Everyday Life* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2006).

³³ Gary Holloway and Earl Lavender, *Living God's Love: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2004).

You Breathe: Exploring the Practice of Breath Prayer by Houston Heflin.³⁴ These informed the development of the curriculum for the cohort greatly.

Towards Designing an Assessment Tool

Finally, the following resources proved to be helpful in the assessment phase of the project. Lynn Underwood's DSE Scale, described in *Spiritual Connection in Daily Life: 16 Little Questions That Can Make a Big Difference*, was designed to measure one's "daily spiritual experience" through sixteen simple questions.³⁵ This DSE Scale has been used in several research projects including that of Travis Sharpe.³⁶ I consulted with Sharpe while also drawing upon Underwood's work to inform the design of my own assessment tool. Ultimately, I felt that the questions of the DSE Scale did not correspond with the specific goals of this project. Even more helpful in designing my assessment tool was Tim Sensing's *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses*.³⁷ His step-by-step instruction on the process of D. Min. research greatly informed my thinking as I worked to design assessments that would appropriately measure the spiritual growth I was looking to spur through this project.

³⁴ Jackie L. Halstead, *Leaning into God's Embrace: A Guidebook for Contemplative Prayer* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2021); Houston Heflin, *Pray Like You Breathe: Exploring the Practice of Breath Prayer* (Abilene, TX: Creek Bend Press, 2017).

³⁵ Lynn G. Underwood, *Spiritual Connection in Daily Life: Sixteen Little Questions That Can Make a Big Difference* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2013).

³⁶ Travis Sharpe, "Discipleship Programs and Spiritual Formation: Does a Discipleship Program at Grace Bridge Church Combining a Missional/Narrative Hermeneutic with Spiritual Disciplines Lead to a Noticeable Change in Love of God and Others?" (D. Min. diss., Hazelip School of Theology at Lipscomb University, 2015).

³⁷ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

Theological Reflection

Clarifying the key terms is important before delving into the theological foundation of spiritual formation developed further in chapter two. Several key terms need clarification: (1) *spirituality*; (2) *discipleship*; (3) *spiritual formation*; and (4) *spiritual disciplines/practices*. These are integrally related, but each has a unique meaning.

Spirituality is a general term used in so many different ways today that it has become vague to many.³⁸ Spirituality is rooted in the term “spirit” (Heb. *ruach* or Grk. *pneuma*) and is used variously for breath, wind, and spirit in the Old Testament. *The Zondervan Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* defines spirituality as, “the domain of lived Christian experience. It is about living all of life, not just some esoteric portion of it, before God, through Christ, in the transforming and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.”³⁹ How one understands spirituality greatly affects how one understands spiritual growth toward maturity in Christ.

Holt explains that the term refers to three distinct realities: a capacity, a style, and an academic discipline.⁴⁰ He prefers to think of the term across the dimensions of being, relating, and doing. “Spirituality is about being,” he suggests, “because we are small yet significant persons in a big universe. The way we picture that universe, and its creator will determine how we see the meaning of our own existence.”⁴¹ Second, it refers to a

³⁸ Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, 6.

³⁹ Glen G. Scorgie, “Overview of Christian Spirituality,” *Zondervan Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

⁴⁰ Holt, *Thirsty for God*, 6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

way of relating. It can refer to our way of relating to God, to ourselves, to others, and even to the creation.⁴² Henri Nouwen draws from this idea as he discusses the “three movements of the spiritual life” in his book, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*.⁴³ Third, it is also used to refer to the academic discipline of studying these first two meanings. As such, it is an emerging interdisciplinary field that includes contributions from history, sociology, psychology, and philosophy.

Hawkins and Parkinson point to Jesus’ own words and the Greatest Command for their definition of spirituality. They define it as “one’s personal relationship with God demonstrated by the degree of one’s love for God and love for others,” (Matt. 22:37-40).⁴⁴ How does one demonstrate love for God? Jesus answered that question himself, contend Hawkins and Parkinson. “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me” (John 14:21).⁴⁵ Thus, Hawkins and Parkinson emphasize, “Our commission, as church leaders, is to help the people in our congregations to become disciples who obey Jesus by loving God and loving others.”⁴⁶

Secondly, a *disciple* is one who has committed to following Jesus, and, thus, *discipleship* describes that task of “followship.” Jesus’ initial invitation, “Come, follow

⁴² Ibid., 31.

⁴³ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York, NY: Image Books, 1975).

⁴⁴ This is based upon the working definition that Hawkins and Parkinson use in their research and attempt to measure. The bulk of their research seeks to measure the degree to which individuals demonstrate a love for God and a love for others, based upon Jesus’ Greatest Command (Matt. 22:37-40).

⁴⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

⁴⁶ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 12.

me and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19), was a call to discipleship. It was an invitation to become his student with the aim of becoming like him. “No student is above his master, but when fully trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). The word *disciple* (*mathetes*), and its related verbal form (*matheteuo*), are sometimes used in an educational setting (Matt. 10:24; 13:52), notes James Samra.⁴⁷ In these cases, discipleship implies the process of education led by a teacher. Still, *mathetes*, sometimes translated *student*, is perhaps better to be translated *apprentice*. The goal of an apprentice, at least in the ancient world, was to become like his master. As such, the term implies total life transformation (Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; Matt. 1:17-18).⁴⁸

In these examples, discipleship is depicted as the task of becoming like one’s master. Discipleship, then, involves training. Its goal is to become increasingly like Jesus, being transformed from the inside out: in mind, heart, and character.⁴⁹ This process of transformation that a disciple undergoes is, thirdly, *spiritual formation*. The two terms, *discipleship* and *spiritual formation*, are often used interchangeably, but it is helpful to make a distinction. If discipleship is the task of apprenticing to Jesus, *spiritual formation* is what happens as that disciple does so. The disciple is changed, or formed, increasingly into the character of Christ. Paul often wrote of the ongoing work of the disciple as that of transformation (using variations of the root *morphe*). “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2); “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of

⁴⁷ Samra, “A Biblical View of Discipleship,” 219.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Bill Hull, “Spiritual Formation from the Inside Out,” in *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, ed. Alan Andrews (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 107–138.

childbirth until Christ be formed in you” (Gal. 4:19).⁵⁰ This use of *morphe* suggests more than an outward change of behavior or appearance, but a radical transformation of the inward individual, heart, soul, and mind.

This process of spiritual formation is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit. Highlighting this role of the Spirit, Wilhoit defines Christian spiritual formation as, “The intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.”⁵¹ Scripture certainly emphasizes this role of the Spirit. “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18).

While it is correct to say that it is the Holy Spirit that transforms, this transformation does not come about without personal effort. Paul speaks of the effort that a disciple must put forth for true transformation to take place in 1 Timothy.⁵²

Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come (1 Tim. 4:7-8).

True maturity comes from pursuing training in godliness. Thus, we are to understand that spiritual growth happens as a result of God's Spirit working in and through our intentional efforts and transforming us increasingly into the likeness and

⁵⁰ Dettoni, “What Is Spiritual Formation?,” 15.

⁵¹ Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as If the Church Mattered*, 23.

⁵² Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor, and R. Robert Creech, *The Leader's Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Baker Academic, 2020), 155.

character of Jesus. The training exercises which can facilitate this transformation are called, fourthly, *Spiritual disciplines*. Exercises such as prayer, meditation, Bible reading, and fasting, have been practiced through the ages and found to “open the door” to God’s gift of inner transformation.⁵³ Some recoil at the thought of spiritual exercises, seeing in them a works-based notion of righteousness. Dallas Willard, however, provides a proper explanation in his well-known quip, “Grace is opposed to earning, but is not opposed to effort.”⁵⁴

These terms reveal the path of a disciple towards the goal of spiritual maturity, or fullness in Christ expressed in Ephesians, “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). Thus, as we take up the task of becoming disciples of Jesus, we are transformed by God’s Spirit, in ever-increasing measure, into the likeness and character of Jesus. Christ is formed in us. This spiritual formation is facilitated through a training process employing spiritual practices. The goal is to grow and mature into the fullness of Jesus Christ by the power of his Spirit.

Methodology

This program development project was carried out in three phases: (1) design; (2) implementation; and (3) assessment.⁵⁵ The design phase involved five tasks. The first task was to decide upon the context for the project. I decided that a small group of ten to

⁵³ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 6.

⁵⁴ Willard, *The Great Omission*, 61.

⁵⁵ Nancy J. Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain Robertson, *Your Guide to Writing Quality Research Papers for Students of Religion and Theology*, Third Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 45.

twelve participants would be ideal for helping to develop the communal aspect that I knew would be essential. Initially, I had planned that we would meet for a quarter or twelve weeks. This was reduced to nine weeks due to scheduling conflicts and my departure from the congregation in May of 2022. The second task was to write the curriculum for each session, a “curriculum for Christlikeness,” to borrow a phrase coined by Dallas Willard.⁵⁶ I designed these lessons around four key catalysts for spiritual growth identified by Hawkins and Parkinson: (1) Bible study; (2) meditative reading; (3) prayer; and (4) serving others.⁵⁷ These were among the top catalysts identified by Hawkins and Parkinson as catalysts for spiritual growth and seemed like they would be well-received by members in my context.⁵⁸ I also believed that I could demonstrate a fresh approach to each one that would encourage them to delve deeper into the practice than they had. I drew heavily from class lecture notes from Spiritual and Theological Formation offered by Harding School of Theology in the Fall of 2021 taught by Dr. Mark Adams.⁵⁹

The third task of the design phase was the development of an assessment tool to discern the benefits of the cohort and assess spiritual growth. I compared different types of assessments and decided to design my own based on my specific goals: (1) to increase understanding; (2) to equip with spiritual practices; and (3) to spur spiritual growth. I decided to utilize three methods of assessing the project’s effectiveness. First, I

⁵⁶ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 311. See also Wilhoit, 38.

⁵⁷ Hawkins and Parkinson identify a total of 25 catalysts, *Move*, 123.

⁵⁸ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 123.

⁵⁹ Mark Adams, Class Lecture Notes, *Spiritual and Theological Formation* (BMIN 5877) Harding School of Theology, Fall 2021.

developed a questionnaire using a basic Likert scale which would evaluate the specific disciplines. Second, I created a questionnaire with open-ended questions to provide feedback for possible improvements to the program. Third, I decided that I would keep field notes as the project got underway. I would compare the results from these three different data streams at the end of the project to determine the project's effectiveness. The tools were submitted to the Internal Review Board (IRB) of Harding University and approved ahead of beginning the project.

The fourth task of the design phase was to recruit participants for the cohort. The initial cohort was composed of twelve active members of the Washington Street Church of Christ, both men and women who were leaders or persons of influence within the congregation. Participants were chosen based on interest and desire for spiritual growth with the intent of having a diversity of age groups represented. I began by asking our Elders for their suggestions. I then initiated several informal conversations with members who had previously expressed an interest in spiritual formation. Knowing the congregation well, as I did, was a key factor in this selection process. I limited the group to twelve participants, plus myself, to maximize efficient small-group dynamics.⁶⁰ I anticipated that group size would be an important factor in creating a sense of community among the members of the group. Healthy community is essential to spiritual growth.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Arnold, *The Big Book of Small Groups*, 9.

⁶¹ Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie, *Discipleship in Community*, 15.

Finally, as a fifth task of the design phase, I named the cohort *Formatio*, the Latin term for formation, and designed a logo to publicize it to the incoming group members.⁶² I spent ten to twelve weeks in this design and recruitment phase.

Phase two was the implementation phase. I led the small group cohort through the curriculum meeting weekly over the course of nine weeks. Sessions were conducted during a mutually agreed upon meeting time, Wednesday evenings during the church's Bible study hour. Since it was held in tandem with the Children's Bible classes, there would be no need to arrange for additional childcare for participants.

I followed Gunnell's approach in dividing each session into three primary components: (1) introduction and teaching relative to a specified spiritual practice; (2) active engagement in the selected practice together; and (3) opportunity to reflect together on the experience practicing the discipline both together and at home. It was important to include time for all three, teaching, practice, and reflection. Homework was also assigned each week. Participants were instructed to take that week's designated discipline and practice it throughout the week. I impressed upon the group that spiritual growth does not primarily occur in a classroom, but rather through putting into practice what is learned and through the power of the Spirit.

Ogden emphasizes four ingredients necessary for a group of this kind to facilitate spiritual growth: (1) transparent trust; (2) the truth of God's Word in community; (3) life-change accountability; and (4) engagement in our God-given mission as essential to creating what he calls "the hothouse effect."⁶³ "Hothouses," he explains, "are heated

⁶² See the cohort Notebook in Appendix F.

⁶³ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 144.

enclosures that create the right environmental conditions for living things to grow at a rate greater than under natural circumstances.” His goal in facilitating spiritual growth was to find the right kind of environment best for this to take place. While Ogden concluded the format of a “triad” or “*microgroup*” (a small group of three to four) was most effective,⁶⁴ I wanted to determine if a small group of ten to twelve could produce similar results.

Phase Three consisted of assessing and analyzing the data to determine the program’s effectiveness. This assessment utilized a variety of tools for data collection. First, I used results provided by the quantitative survey to look at how participants described themselves before the cohort and at how they described themselves after the cohort looking for changes, positively or negatively. Second, I looked at the suggestions provided by the open-ended questions on the survey tool. I coded the comments and looked for common themes and recurring ideas. Finally, I analyzed my field notes from each session which also included any personal observations of participants’ behavior, speech, and willingness to share during the sessions.

It was hoped that this program would be a catalyst for additional, similar, sessions for the congregation. The larger vision would be for it to become a repeated offering, allowing more members to participate, and for it to contribute to the greater overall spiritual growth of the congregation.

The initial design and development phase lasted several months. The prospectus was approved in April 2021. Curriculum development and refinement took place during the Fall of 2021. Phase Two, the implementation phase, began in March 2022 and

⁶⁴ Ibid., 138.

continued for nine weeks through mid-May 2022. The assessment and conclusions were conducted during the Summer and Fall of 2022. Just before the implementation phase of this project, I announced my resignation as the church's preaching minister to transition to another work and completed the cohort just before my departure.

Limitations and Delimitations

This project was delimited to members of the Washington Street Church of Christ. It was also delimited to twelve participants selected for the initial cohort. The project was further delimited to an initial nine-week time frame. An inherent limitation of this project was the level of active participation on the part of cohort members themselves. Though the process of spiritual growth is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit, individual effort, as discussed above, is an essential component and is largely out of the control of the group leader. Another limitation of this project is the long-term impact. While seeds were planted here, it is understood that it may take years before these grow and bear fruit toward fuller spiritual maturity. This being the case, spiritual formation is better understood as a marathon rather than a sprint.

Outline of the Dissertation

This project dissertation details my efforts to design a small group program to educate, equip, and transform members of the Washington Street Church of Christ towards greater spiritual maturity in Christ. It is comprised of five chapters and various appendices. In chapter one I have established the problem to be addressed in the congregation at Washington Street Church of Christ, reviewed the literature, and provided an outline of my methodology. In chapter two, I further develop the theological foundations upon which this project was built, going into greater detail on core principles

of spiritual growth. Chapter three details the program development and design. In chapter four, I describe what was learned through the process with evaluation and reflection based on group feedback and assessments. In chapter five, I conclude by comparing the evaluations against the theological foundation and make suggestions for improvements to the program. Appendices will include a compilation of scholarly definitions of spiritual formation, assessment tools, an informed consent agreement signed by participants, and session curriculum, including homework assignments.

Chapter Two

A THEOLOGY OF DISCIPLESHIP AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

There is increasing interest in spiritual formation within both academic and ministry circles. “Spiritual Formation is in,” Evan Howard wrote in 2002.¹ This remains as true today as ever before. Books, seminars, seminary courses, and even entire degrees are offered in spiritual formation. Still, the term itself is a nebulous one to many churchgoers.² It is used in so many different ways and with so many varying meanings the average churchgoer can be left confused. In this chapter I will seek, first, to clarify the concepts of *Christian spirituality* and *discipleship* as they relate to *spiritual formation*. Then I will describe a theological foundation helpful in understanding spiritual formation. Finally, I will describe the process of spiritual formation and what factors play into that process. This is important because the purpose of this project is to facilitate spiritual growth and greater formation of disciples into the likeness of Jesus through select spiritual practices.

Christian Spirituality

The term *spirituality* itself means many different things to different people.³ *Spirituality* is used variously to refer to one’s relationship with God through the Spirit, to the “deepest recesses of human experience.” It is also used to refer to an individual’s

¹ Evan B. Howard, “Three Temptations of Spiritual Formation,” *Christianity Today* 46, no. 13 (December 9, 2002): 46–49.

² Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, 6.

³ Powell, *A Theology of Christian Spirituality*, 16.

inward nature, one's own "spirit."⁴ Geoffrey Wainwright defines spirituality as, "the combination of prayer and living" as a starting point for understanding spirituality.⁵ Building off of that definition, Yarnold explains this embodiment of prayer in life is what New Testament writers describe by terms such as "living sacrifice", "spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1), and "spiritual sacrifices" (1 Pet. 2:5).⁶ Evan Howard traces the history of the word *spirituality* through the Latin *spiritualitas* and the Greek *pneumatikos*. It is sometimes used to describe the sense of something "spiritual" as opposed to "bodily" existence, or the idea of one's inner life.⁷ Sometimes, as Powell observes, the term is simply used to refer to *religion* in America.⁸

More than just an inner concept, others emphasize outward dimensions of spirituality. Hawkins and Parkinson, for example, define spirituality as "one's personal relationship with God through Christ by the power of the Spirit demonstrated by one's love for God and love for others."⁹ For them, spirituality is about the outward demonstration of love both for God and neighbor. They point to Jesus' commands to love God and love neighbor as a summation of the purpose of the entire law (Matt. 22:37-40).

⁴ Evan B. Howard, "Advancing the Discussion: Reflections on the Study of Christian Spiritual Life," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 10.

⁵ Geoffrey Wainwright, "Types of Spirituality," in *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold (Oxford University Press, 1986), 592.

⁶ Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, eds., *The Study of Spirituality* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1986), 9.

⁷ Howard, "Advancing the Discussion: Reflections on the Study of Christian Spiritual Life," 10.

⁸ Powell, *A Theology of Christian Spirituality*, 16.

⁹ This is a combination of Howard's definition of Christian spirituality, "the study of lived relationship with God through Christ" and the understanding of Hawkins and Parkinson in their research. Drawing on Jesus' "Greatest Commands," Hawkins and Parkinson use the degree to which one (1) loves God and (2) loves neighbor as an indicator of one's spiritual maturity.

Hawkins and Parkinson's definition prompts the question, "How, then, does one quantify or assess love for God?" Indeed, is spirituality something that can be measured?

Henri Nouwen cautions against putting too much weight on such attempts.

Many great saints have described their religious experiences, and many lesser saints have systemized them into different phases, levels, or stages. These distinctions can be helpful for those who write books and for those who use them to instruct, but it is of great importance that we leave the world of measurements behind when we speak about the life of the Spirit.¹⁰

Thus, it is with great caution and humility that this project seeks to do just that, facilitate, and then assess, this spiritual process. For Hawkins and Parkinson, Jesus' own words provide one way to assess spirituality, through one's obedience to his commands. "If you love me, you will do what I say" (John 14:21). Thus, Hawkins and Parkinson emphasize, "Our commission, as church leaders, is to help the people in our congregations to become disciples who obey Jesus by loving God and loving others."¹¹

This most certainly fits Paul's usage of the term *spiritual* (*pneumatikos*). For him, spiritual is the term he applies to believers who had received the Spirit of God (Gal. 6:1; 1 Cor. 2:13-15) and in whom the "fruit of the Spirit" was being produced.¹² "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). Greenman refers to these as "distinctive virtues of Christian faith" that are the direct result of God's Spirit forming the character of Christ in us.¹³

¹⁰ Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, 17.

¹¹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 12.

¹² Thompson, *The Church According to Paul*, 103.

¹³ Jeffrey P. Greenman, "Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective," in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 26.

They are “outward demonstrations” of one’s “inward spirit” when walking with God’s Spirit and are, thus, important indicators of one’s spiritual maturity.

The Relationship of Discipleship to Spiritual Formation

The terms *spiritual formation* and *discipleship* are often used interchangeably. For this project, however, a clarifying distinction is necessary. The initial invitation of Jesus was a call to *discipleship*. It was an invitation to “come and follow” (Matt. 4:19). More than 265 times the term *disciple* (*mathetes*) is used in the New Testament. Curiously, the word Christian is used a mere four times in the New Testament by comparison.¹⁴ With only a few notable exceptions, the disciples of John the Baptist being among them, *mathetes* is used to denote those who had accepted the invitation to follow Jesus.¹⁵ Discipleship, then, is the task of following Jesus and disciples are those who have made that commitment. Dallas Willard writes, “Discipleship may be loosely described as staying as close to Jesus Christ as possible. It is life with him, his life with us.”¹⁶

The related verbal form of *mathetes* (*matheteuo*) is often used in the sense of being taught by an educator, a teacher, or a master. Understood in this way, it is often translated as *student*, or *pupil*.¹⁷ In ancient Greece the term was used in a general sense to describe one “who directs his mind to something.”¹⁸ It took on a more specific, almost

¹⁴ Keith Matthews, “The Transformational Process,” in *Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, ed. Alan Andrews (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 89.

¹⁵ K.H. Rengstorf, “mathetes,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 441.

¹⁶ Dallas Willard, “Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation,” in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 53.

¹⁷ Samra, “A Biblical View of Discipleship,” 219.

¹⁸ Rengstorf, “mathetes,” 416.

technical sense, as it came to be used as one who placed himself under the tutelage of another, one with greater authority and superior knowledge.¹⁹ *Mathetes*, then, was the usual word for *apprentice*. This relationship between master and apprentice was widely known throughout the ancient world, particularly in the sphere of philosophical and religious learning.²⁰ The goal of an apprentice, however, was not only to learn the teachings of a master intellectually, but to take on the way of life demonstrated by that master, to become like that master inasmuch is possible. Jesus expressed that goal, himself, “No student is above his master, but when fully trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). Thus, the term discipleship emphasizes the efforts of the disciple to follow Jesus’ example and teachings.

Spiritual formation is what happens to the disciple by the power of the Spirit as he or she sets about that task. Greg Ogden offers insight into the distinction between discipleship language and the language of spiritual formation. He observes that the terms “make disciples” and “be a disciple” dominate Jesus’ language in the Gospels and the account of the early church in Acts but are largely absent in Paul’s writings.²¹ Paul does not speak of having disciples.²² This does not mean, however, that the concept of discipleship is completely absent in Pauline thought.²³ Paul was very much a disciple of

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 418.

²¹ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 95.

²² The only reference to disciples in Paul’s missionary activity is found in Acts 9:24-25 as his “disciples” assisted his escape from Damascus. This is attributed to Luke, however. He, himself, did not use the term.

²³ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 95.

Jesus and was a successful maker of disciples. His language, though, relies more heavily on the ideas of *growing*, *maturing*, being *formed*, and *transformed*; variations on the Greek *morphe*.

Spiritual Formation Language is Pauline Language

Though the term spiritual formation, itself, is not found in the New Testament, James Thompson argues Paul is its ultimate source.²⁴ It is Paul, himself, who provides the vocabulary for what would later be called spiritual formation by his frequent use of both *pneumatikos* and *morphe*.²⁵ Not only does Paul often employ the term *spiritual* (*pneumatikos*) to refer to those who have received the Spirit, as mentioned above, he uniquely uses the term *morphe* to describe the transformation that takes place in the life of a Spirit-filled believer.²⁶ His vision for those who have received the Spirit of God is nothing less than total, moral transformation.

Paul's missionary concerns were not limited to the planting of new churches and conversions, as important as those were to the spread of the gospel. His ultimate desire was for the communities, to whom he wrote, to be formed ever-increasingly into the likeness and character of Jesus. This is demonstrated throughout his writings and is, indeed, the primary concern in each of his letters. Contrary to traditional interpretations that have assumed Paul's ethical instruction is either an appendix or simply an

²⁴ Thompson, *The Church According to Paul*, 108.

²⁵ Thompson, *Moral Formation According to Paul*, 2.

²⁶ James W. Thompson, "Paul and Spiritual Formation," *Christian Studies* 24 (2010): 7.

application of his theology, the moral transformation taking place within those communities is his primary concern.²⁷

Paul envisions the Christian life as a narrative having a beginning, a middle, and an end. Throughout his letters he consistently reminds his readers both of their new beginning in Christ (cf. Rom. 6:1-4; 1 Cor. 1:26-2:5; 2 Cor. 1:18-20; Gal. 3:1-5; Phil. 1:6; 1 Thess. 1:5) and their end goal (cf. Rom. 2:5; 7:6; 13:2; 1 Cor. 3:13; 5:5; 2 Cor. 1:14; Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16; 1 Thess. 5:2,4).²⁸ At the final day, their ultimate purpose is to be *conformed (symmorphous)* to the likeness of Christ.

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed (*symmorphous*) to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers (Rom. 8:28-30).

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform (*symmorphon*) our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (Phil. 3:20-21).

This final transformation which will take place at Christ's second coming is not all that is in view here, however. Paul envisions moral transformation in the present, literally a "meta-morphosis," as a "prelude" to that ultimate transformation to come.²⁹

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed (*metamorphoumetha*) into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18).

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed (*metamorphousthe*) by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is- his good, pleasing, and perfect will (Rom. 12:2).

²⁷ Thompson, *Moral Formation According to Paul*, 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

Paul, perhaps, had Old Testament imagery in mind in his frequent use of formation language.³⁰ The Old Testament prophet Isaiah cried out to God, “Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand” (Isa. 64:8). He pictured the people of God as being formed, shaped by the hand of God, himself. Jeremiah was even more descriptive with this type of language.

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. Then the word of the LORD came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the LORD. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel (Jer. 18:1-6).

Remarkably, God is not discouraged by the marred or misshapen clay. He does not give up or discard his clay. Instead, he continues to work, re-shaping it “as seems best to him” (Jer. 18:4). Paul certainly draws on similar language in Ephesians, “For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10). The word workmanship (*poiema*) refers to the product of one's hands such as a beautiful sculpture, a priceless painting, or a useful pot of clay. Indeed, if the potter and clay imagery is in the background of Paul's thought, it demonstrates another key principle of spiritual formation. Spiritual formation is primarily the work of God, not the clay. Those who are being spiritually formed, in this case the church in Ephesus, are his “workmanship” (Eph. 2:10), being shaped and re-shaped by God, himself.

³⁰ Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, 10.

Ogden has rightly observed that Paul also speaks of this spiritual transformation in parenting terms.³¹ He often addresses the disciples to whom he writes as infants and children (1 Cor. 3:1-2) putting himself in the role of parent. For Paul, the goal of a child of God is to grow to maturity. “Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults” (1 Cor. 14:20-21).

Here Paul uses the term *teleios* to mean “mature” or, more precisely, “complete.” *Teleios* is sometimes translated *perfect*, not in the sense of being without flaws, but in the sense of having reached that stage of maturity or intended completion (Phil. 3:12; Col. 3:14; Col. 1:28; 1 Cor. 13:10). In the early church the baptized were often called *teleios*, as opposed to the *catechumens*, who were still in a preparational or instructional period prior to baptism.³² In Ephesians, the *teleios* have grown to the “whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). By contrast, those who are children in the faith are unstable, “tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (Eph. 4:14).

Thompson concludes, “Recognizing converts will be ‘conformed to the image of the Son’ at the final day only if they are being transformed into the same image, he [Paul] describes himself as the mother about to give birth.”³³ Paul writes, “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (Gal. 4:19).

³¹ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 95.

³² *Ibid.*, 98.

³³ Thompson, *Moral Formation According to Paul*, 2.

This *formation*, then, is not only the focal point of Paul’s theology, but also the primary goal of his missionary work with the churches to whom he writes.

Thus, for this project, I view *discipleship* and *spiritual formation* as two sides of the same coin. Discipleship describes the efforts of the disciple in following Jesus. The goal of discipleship is to become as much like Jesus as possible. Spiritual formation describes the process of being changed into the likeness and character of Jesus by the power of the Spirit. It is a process of growing and maturing, much like that of the physical body. It is also a process that involves several factors, not the least of which is the direct action of the Holy Spirit upon the inner person.³⁴

The Process of Spiritual Formation

Exploring the Definition

Even a cursory survey of the literature reveals a wide variety of thought regarding the process of spiritual formation. A sampling of definitions is compiled in the appendix.³⁵ I offer this definition, an adaptation of Wilhoit’s by Zcheille, as a suggested understanding of spiritual formation: *Spiritual formation is the intentional, communal process of growing in our relationship with God and being formed in Christ-likeness by the power of the Spirit for the sake of the world.*³⁶

³⁴ Dallas Willard, notes from Plenary Address at the Spiritual Formation forum, Los Angeles, 2004. (Quoted in Hull, “Spiritual Formation from the Inside Out.” *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2010), 116.

³⁵ See Appendix A for a compilation of many of these definitions. A comparison and contrast could be helpful in identifying key concepts. Howard undertakes such in his *A Guide to Spiritual Formation*, 16.

³⁶ James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*, 23. With Zcheille, I added “for the sake of the world” and adapted my language to emphasize the concepts of both growing in relationship with God and being “formed in Christ-likeness.”

This definition emphasizes several key principles: (1) spiritual formation is a process; (2) spiritual formation is a communal process; (3) spiritual formation is a process directed by the Holy Spirit; (4) the goal of spiritual formation is to grow in Christ-likeness; (5) spiritual formation is not an end unto itself but is intended for the sake of others; and (6) spiritual formation is an intentional process.

(1) Spiritual formation is a process

Mullholland explores the metaphor of a journey to describe the process of spiritual formation.³⁷ From the time one makes the decision to set out, this journey is marked by ups and downs, victories and defeats, detours, and unexpected obstacles along the way. While the destination must always be kept in focus, it is the journey that prepares the traveler for arrival. It is important to view spiritual formation as a journey or a process, not a singular or one-time event. Friedrich Nietzsche described it as “a long obedience in the same direction.”³⁸

Paul’s abundant usage of “growing” and “maturing” terminology further indicates that spiritual formation is a process and not a one-time event.³⁹ It is not exclusively Pauline, however. Peter also admonishes disciples to grow and mature in the qualities that come from a life lived in the Spirit.

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith, goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in

³⁷ Mullholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 23.

³⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche quoted by Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2021), 7.

³⁹ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 579.

increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:5-8).

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18).

Spiritual formation and the fruit which results is a process that one continues to grow in throughout the journey of life. Though one never reaches full *teleios*, or maturity, but should always continue to grow and develop into greater Christ-likeness, it is instructive to consider stages of growth. Hawkins and Parkinson were particularly interested in defining these stages of growth so they could identify catalysts to move individuals from one stage to the next.⁴⁰

Mulholland outlines four “classical stages” of spiritual growth: (1) awakening-- that first encounter with God and encounter with self that brings awareness of God’s activity in one’s life; (2) purgation-- the renouncing of sin and the beginning of trust in God; (3) illumination-- the total consecration and dedication to God, internalizing faith; and (4) union-- the unabashed abandonment to God’s grace.⁴¹

Other efforts to identify distinct stages have been helpful for this project as well.⁴² Ogden examines the ministry of Jesus with his disciples in the gospels and observes five distinct stages of their development.⁴³ His stages can be seen to correspond somewhat loosely with the segments of church attendees identified in the *Reveal* study.⁴⁴ For this

⁴⁰ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 22.

⁴¹ Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 93–116.

⁴² Stephen Fortosis, “Theological Foundations for a Stage Model of Spiritual Formation,” *Religious Education* 96, no. 1 (2001): 49.

⁴³ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 79–94.

⁴⁴ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 21.

project, I suggest the following as a concise, short-hand way of understanding the growth and development of a disciple. It is based on the work of Ogden, Mulholland and Hawkins, and Parkinson.⁴⁵

Stages of Spiritual Formation

Stage One: *Exploring Christ*-- those who have shown a degree of interest in Jesus and spiritual things but have not made a personal commitment. They may be regular attenders but are content to stay “on the fringe.”⁴⁶ Ogden draws on the work of A. A. Bruce and calls this the “pre-disciple” or “inquiry” stage.⁴⁷ A commitment has not been made, but questions are being asked. Interest is shown. In John 1:39, Jesus invites Andrew and an unnamed disciple to “come and see.” This describes the task at the first stage of spiritual growth.

Stage Two: *Growing in Christ*-- a decision and commitment have been made to trust God, but as a new infant in Christ, one is still only beginning to learn what it means to grow in relationship with God and Christ-likeness. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus extends the invitation to Simon and Andrew, “Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). This was more than the invitation to “Come and see,” Jesus was asking for a commitment, which they accepted. “At once they left their nets and followed him” (Mark 1:17-18).

Stage Three: *Close to Christ*-- those who demonstrate an increasing dependence on Christ and live with a sense of God’s guidance and help in issues they face daily. They have

⁴⁵ This is based heavily on the work of Hawkins and Parkinson but has also been informed by the work of Mulholland, Ogden.

⁴⁶ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 32.

⁴⁷ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 63.

“gone public”⁴⁸ with their faith and live it out with confidence. In Luke 6, Jesus gathered his many disciples and selected twelve to be apostles.

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles (Luke 6:12-13).

This represented an ever-deepening level of commitment on the part of the disciples as these twelve accepted Jesus’ designations of apostleship.

Stage Four: Christ-Centered- those who demonstrate that their relationship with Jesus is the most important relationship in their lives. This is “union” with Christ⁴⁹ and “attaining to the whole measure the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). The challenge Jesus laid before his disciples at this point in their spiritual growth is found in the great commission to “go and tell.”

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20).

It is important to emphasize that these stages should not be used to pigeonhole individuals into certain pre-conceived categories. Nor should it be assumed that every believer journeys through these stages in a strictly linear fashion from one to the next. These stages are best understood as “dynamic,” not “static.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 73.

⁴⁹ Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 112–115.

⁵⁰ Gunnells, “Forming Leaders Through Spiritual Disciplines,” 23.

(2) *Spiritual formation is a communal process*

To say spiritual formation is a communal process means, first, that spiritual formation is wholly dependent on the divine community, the Triune God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie define *discipleship* as “participation in the life and mission of the Trinitarian God.”⁵¹ The Triune God exists as a divine community of perfect relationship and provides the perfect model for the perfect community. *Community* is not just a “contemporary buzzword or cool idea,” states Keith Matthews.

It [community] is grounded in the Trinitarian nature of the Godhead, the three in one. God, Himself exists in a loving community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And we are created in the image of God. So, humanity is uniquely a communal creation.⁵²

Spiritual formation is communal, secondly, in that God intends for discipleship to occur within the communal context of a faith community.⁵³ This principle is echoed by Wilhoit, “The Christian life is best lived in community, where worship, fellowship, and service are practiced, and spiritual formation takes place in, through, and for community.”⁵⁴ It would be wrong to perceive of spiritual formation as a completely private affair, something to be developed exclusively in the secrecy of one’s home between oneself and God. Rather, it is something that is shared, encouraged, and spurred on by the fellowship of believers (Acts 2:42-47). It is indeed “actualized” through the

⁵¹ Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie, *Discipleship in Community*, 15.

⁵² Matthews, “The Transformational Process,” 102.

⁵³ Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie, *Discipleship in Community*, 15.

⁵⁴ Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as If the Church Mattered*, 23.

nurturing and caring of one another which takes place within the community or the fellowship of the church.⁵⁵ Indeed, it is the community of believers which is the primary context for spiritual formation.⁵⁶ Thrall and McNicol also echo Wilhoit in their emphasis on the communal context necessary for healthy spiritual growth.⁵⁷

Ogden emphasizes the essential role that relationship plays in equipping disciples to make disciples, specifically the relationship between a mentor or teacher and mentee or student. “I am not opposed to curricula, complete with sequential knowledge, skills acquisition, spiritual disciplines, and doctrinal content, but for transformation to occur all this must be processed in the context of a relational commitment.”⁵⁸ The importance of community to personal spiritual formation speaks to the significance of relationships formed within the body of Christ which encourage growth to occur. Grenz agrees and adds that a positive aspect of our culture’s shift towards postmodernism has been a “turn to relationships: a recognition that humans are fundamentally social creatures.”⁵⁹

Thirdly, that spiritual formation is a communal process means that the Spirit is at work transforming people collectively, not only individually.⁶⁰ Contrary to popular understanding, Paul, particularly, does not envision spiritual formation as an exclusively

⁵⁵ Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 21.

⁵⁶ Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, 114.

⁵⁷ Bill Thrall and Bruce McNicol, “Communities of Grace,” in *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, ed. Alan Andrews (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 66.

⁵⁸ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 115–117.

⁵⁹ Stanley J. Grenz, “Ecclesiology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Post-Modern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 252.

⁶⁰ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 180.

private matter. He refers in his letters to the people in corporate terms, as communities that he will present to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; Rom. 15:16).⁶¹ He describes his “anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28). Indeed, Paul’s focus is on the spiritual formation of the entire communities (i.e., churches) to whom he writes. This contrasts with our contemporary tendency to personalize and individualize every text. It is important to remember that spiritual formation not only takes place within the community, but involves the formation of the community, itself.⁶²

(3) Spiritual formation is a process directed by the Holy Spirit

This process of spiritual formation is primarily the work of God’s Holy Spirit. Lest one gets the idea that the task of spiritual formation is something that we must accomplish under our own power and with our own resources, we must understand that *Christian* spiritual formation is *Spirit*-ual formation, meaning “in and by the power of the Holy Spirit.”⁶³ Peterson writes, “Spiritual formation is primarily what the Spirit does, forming the resurrection life of Christ in us.”⁶⁴

While some think of “spiritual” in terms of simply that non-material dimension of human existence, Dwight Zscheille suggests it is rather to be understood as the new “identity” we take on when we dwell in the power and community of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁵ He goes on, “Our identities are reshaped and restored as we are brought by the Spirit into

⁶¹ Thompson, *The Church According to Paul*, 104.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Zscheille, “A Missional Theology of Spiritual Formation,” 16.

⁶⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 237.

⁶⁵ Zscheille, “A Missional Theology of Spiritual Formation,” 16–17.

right relationship with God through Christ, as we experience the restoration of community in the church, and as we engage our neighbors and non-Christian others in mission in which the Spirit works between us.”⁶⁶

Thompson sees the fact Paul only uses forms of *morphe* in the passive voice (Rom. 8:29; 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 4:19) as further evidence to indicate spiritual formation is the work of God. Paul encourages his readers to place themselves at the disposal of God’s power (cf. Rom. 8:1-11) and to “walk by the Spirit” (Rom. 5:16). “Spiritual formation occurs among believers when they place themselves at the disposal of the Spirit.”⁶⁷

Gordon Fee laments the tendency either to downplay or to ignore altogether the role the Spirit plays in spiritual formation. He points to Paul’s use of *pneumatikos*, which refers “universally and unequivocally” to the Holy Spirit and suggests that English translations which render it “spiritual” are to blame for this deficient understanding. He argues this because “spiritual” has “almost no meaning at all, being open to so many different, and almost always incorrect understandings.”⁶⁸ Clarifying the potential for misunderstanding, Dallas Willard wisely writes, “One can think of the process as formation *of* the human spirit as well as formation *by* the divine Spirit, for it is indeed both.”⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁷ Thompson, “Paul and Spiritual Formation,” 8–9.

⁶⁸ Gordon D. Fee, “On Getting the Spirit Back into Spirituality,” in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 17.

⁶⁹ Willard, “Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation,” 46.

“We cannot do it by ourselves [...] spiritual formation is the experience of being shaped by God toward Wholeness.”⁷⁰ This guards against the human tendency to make it into a legalistic, works-based effort. Fee agrees, “the only God-given antidote to legalism (as a way of securing one’s relationship with God) is a full and thoroughgoing reliance on the Spirit.”⁷¹

The doctrine of regeneration is one way of understanding the Spirit’s work in spiritual formation. Michael Glerup notes, “Spiritual formation takes place by the direct work of the Holy Spirit, regenerating and conforming us to the image of Jesus Christ as the Spirit indwells, fills, guides, gifts, and empowers people for life in the community of faith and in the world.”⁷² Willard argues that spiritual formation is a natural and necessary outgrowth of salvation; and suggests that regeneration is the event of a “new type of life” entering into the individual and bringing about change from the inside out. Willard points to the passing from “death” to “life” as a recurring theme in the New Testament as evidence for this type of rebirth or regeneration.⁷³

(4) The goal of spiritual formation is to grow in Christ-likeness

Dallas Willard writes, “As his disciples, we are learning from Jesus how to live our life here and now in the kingdom of the heavens as he would live it if he were in our

⁷⁰ Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 20.

⁷¹ Fee, “On Getting the Spirit Back into Spirituality,” 39.

⁷² Michael Glerup, “The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Formation,” in *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, ed. Alan Andrews (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 251.

⁷³ Willard, “Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation,” 49. See also Titus 3:5; Ephesians 3:20.

place.”⁷⁴ As we think about our spirits being formed by God’s Spirit, it is essential to understand that the goal of this endeavor is to become more like Jesus. Spiritual formation is not simply a “be the best you that you can be” exercise. It is not about self-actualization or reaching one’s God-given potential. These are messages often heard. Spiritual formation has, as its primary objective, to become increasingly Christ-like in every aspect of our lives.⁷⁵ This is the eschatological destiny of Christians.⁷⁶ As the apostle John writes, “we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Richard Foster states this well, “the goal of the Christian life could be summarized as our being formed, conformed, and transformed into the image of Jesus Christ.”⁷⁷

(5) Spiritual formation is for the sake of others

While the goal of spiritual formation is maturity in Christ, it must also be emphasized that this is not an end unto itself. Spiritual formation needs to be seen through the lens of God’s mission. Therefore, Zscheille correctly adds to Wilhoit’s definition of spiritual formation: “...*for the sake of the world.*”⁷⁸ If we forget this, as Mulholland reminds us:

We don’t have Christian spiritual formation; we don’t have holistic spiritual formation. What we have is some kind of pathological formation that is privatized and individualized, a spiritualized form of self-actualization.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁷⁵ See also Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18.

⁷⁶ Greenman, “Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective,” 25.

⁷⁷ Richard J. Foster, “Becoming Like Christ,” *Christianity Today* (February 5, 1996).

⁷⁸ Zscheille, “A Missional Theology of Spiritual Formation,” 7.

⁷⁹ Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 49.

A missional outlook prevents the work of spiritual formation from being merely a “self-help” exercise with an inward or therapeutic focus. Its goal is, rather, to be a blessing to others. This was the purpose for which God called Abram (Gen. 12:2-3). This was the purpose for which God sent his Son (John 3:16). This was the purpose for which Jesus sent his disciples into the world (2 Cor. 1:3-4). This is the purpose for which he offers comfort to those in trouble.⁸⁰ God forms disciples for a greater purpose than themselves. “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10).

Kenneth Berding examines the letters of Paul looking for the intersection between spiritual formation and mission.⁸¹ He considers four options: (1) if there is any connection at all; (2) if mission is primary, and spiritual formation supportive; (3) if spiritual formation is primary, and mission plays a secondary, supportive role; or (4) if there is an “essential interpenetration of mission and spiritual formation.” He argues that the two are so intertwined that neither could be adequately defined without mention and reliance upon the other. Paula Fuller agrees, “Spiritual formation in Christ is a process of growing in kingdom living *and* participating in God’s mission.”⁸²

⁸⁰ Kenneth Berding, “At the Intersection of Mission and Spiritual Formation in the Letters of Paul,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 19.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Paula Fuller, “Participating in God’s Mission,” in *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, ed. Alan Andrews (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 195.

(6) Spiritual formation is an intentional process

Finally, it is necessary to add that the process of spiritual formation is an intentional process, not only on the part of God's Spirit, but also on the part of the individual. The Spirit may be primary, but the individual does not play a passive role. In the oft-referenced quote, Dallas Willard says it well, "God is not opposed to effort, but to earning."⁸³ This is a recurring theme that runs through Willard's writings. Indeed, effort is expected. Scripture even extols its benefits (see 1 Cor. 9:24-27; Gal. 6:7-9; Col. 1:28-29; 1 Tim. 4:7; Heb. 5:14).⁸⁴ From these Scriptures it is obvious that Paul, though saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8), worked diligently. He struggled, but it was with the power of God's Spirit with him that he endured and grew.

Concerned with the lackluster commitment and passion he observed in many Christians during his time as a pastor, Keith Matthews concludes that this is often because of a lackluster "gospel" that they have heard.⁸⁵ Have people been taught the full gospel or some diminished version of it? He describes a "conversion-centric gospel" where the message is focused primarily on getting "saved" and less on growing into Christ-likeness as one inadequate "gospel" that leads to a passive faith. He further labels a "Global activist gospel" where the message is primarily what God is doing in his creation "to bring all things back unto himself" (2 Cor. 5:19), but less concerned about the individual's call to obedience and to what disciples are called to do. He concludes that neither "so-called gospel" tells the whole story and tends to make, not "disciples," but

⁸³ Willard, *The Great Omission*, 61.

⁸⁴ Hull, "Spiritual Formation from the Inside Out," 128.

⁸⁵ Matthews, "The Transformational Process," 88-93.

rather “passive believers.” He emphasizes, “The gospel must work here if it is to work at all.”⁸⁶

We ought to be concerned about our part in spiritual formation, and how we might facilitate greater transformation in ourselves and others.⁸⁷ Without dismissing the role of the Spirit, Paul speaks of the effort which disciples ought to demonstrate.

Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come” (1 Tim. 4:7-8).

True maturity comes from pursuing training in godliness.⁸⁸ Thus, we are to understand that spiritual growth happens as a result of God’s Spirit working in and through our intentional efforts of training ourselves to be more like Jesus. One of the ways that we can join hands with the Spirit of God in this intentional training process is through the regular practice of *spiritual disciplines*. Just as physical training involves the use of any number of physical exercises, Spiritual disciplines are those training exercises that can foster spiritual transformation. Exercises such as prayer, meditation, Bible reading, and fasting, have been practiced through the ages and found to “open the door” to God’s gift of inner transformation.⁸⁹ Howard describes this cooperative training as

⁸⁶ Ibid., 93.

⁸⁷ Howard, “Advancing the Discussion: Reflections on the Study of Christian Spiritual Life,” 12.

⁸⁸ Herrington, Taylor, and Creech, *The Leader’s Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation*, 155.

⁸⁹ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 6.

“the act or habit of intentionally constraining one’s own human experience in the context of God’s active presence to achieve spiritual ends.”⁹⁰

In this project, we focused primarily on the disciplines of (1) prayer (2) Bible study; (3) meditative reading; and (4) serving others. Through prayer we spend time with God. Through Bible study and the meditative reading of Scripture we hear God’s voice speak to us. These disciplines literally facilitate a healthy relationship between God and us. When we serve, we model the very nature of Jesus who “did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). These disciplines were also shown to be key catalysts that help individuals move from one level of maturity to the next in the Hawkins and Parkinson research.⁹¹

Theological Conclusions

In this chapter, I have attempted to clarify the concepts of Christian spirituality and spiritual formation in general. I have explored the relationship between discipleship and spiritual formation as two sides of the same coin, one representative of language common to the gospels and Acts, and one essentially Pauline. One term emphasizes the disciple’s task of following Jesus, the other one emphasizes the Spirit’s work upon that disciple. Finally, I have described the process of spiritual formation, drawing on the research of Hawkins and Parkinson as well as others. Spiritual formation should be understood as an intentional, communal process of growing in relationship with God and being formed in Christ-likeness by the power of the Holy Spirit for the sake of the world.

⁹⁰ Howard, “Advancing the Discussion: Reflections on the Study of Christian Spiritual Life,” 108.

⁹¹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 123.

Spiritual formation does not come without some effort on the part of the disciple. Spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, contemplative Bible reading, Bible study, and service are those exercises in which one engages in to facilitate spiritual growth in partnership with God's Holy Spirit working in us. They bring us to the place where God can shape us and open our hearts to the transforming work of his Spirit. These disciplines must be a part of any "curriculum for Christlikeness" one might engage in.

Chapter Three

METHODOLOGY: CONDUCTING A SPIRITUAL FORMATION COHORT

In chapter one I suggested that there is a need for greater spiritual maturity among church members and this ought to be a priority for the church. There must be thoughtful, intentional effort placed on spiritual formation. Toward this goal, I developed a program to equip members with spiritually formative practices that would facilitate greater spiritual growth. This project was one of program development designed as an intervention to meet the need for greater spiritually mature members in the congregation at Washington Street.¹ As such, I have followed closely the steps outlined by Vyhmeister and Robertson for qualitative research specifically for pastors and church leaders to design and implement such a program.²

This project was carried out in three phases: (1) design; (2) implementation; and (3) evaluation. I have utilized various qualitative research tools in my evaluation of the program's effectiveness, a quantitative survey, a feedback questionnaire, and my personal field notes recorded as the project was underway.³ This multi-methods approach to qualitative research was considered in the design phase to provide the most effective means of evaluating the project's success. This chapter will detail the methodology of the project through these three phases.⁴

¹ Vyhmeister and Robertson, *Your Guide to Writing Quality Research Papers for Students of Religion and Theology*, 45.

² *Ibid.*, 46.

³ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 79.

⁴ Just prior to the Implementation phase of this project, I announced my resignation as the church's preaching minister to transition to a work with a non-profit ministry, EEM. This left an additional need for leadership in the pulpit ministry.

Design Phase:

Following the work of Timothy Gunnells, I decided to utilize a small group format and create a cohort that would meet over the course of several weeks to engage in spiritually formative practices together.⁵ As I emphasized in chapter two, spiritual formation is a communal activity. Community is essential for spiritual growth to take place.⁶ It happens as members encourage and challenge one another. I designed the cohort to include ten to twelve participants to maximize the dynamics of a small group. The group would meet weekly over the course of nine weeks to fit within the schedule of the church's Wednesday evening Bible class offerings. This eliminated the need to offer childcare or to further complicate personal schedules.

The next task of the design phase was to design the curriculum, a "curriculum for Christlikeness," as Dallas Willard describes.⁷ I selected four of the top "catalysts" identified in the *Reveal/Move* study (Bible study, meditative reading, prayer, and serving together) as core spiritual practices to focus upon.⁸ These practices were selected because they were among the most impactful of the twenty-five "catalysts" identified in the *Reveal/Move* research and also because I believed they would be familiar enough to participants that they would be well received. I also believed I could present several new approaches to these disciplines which would deepen participants' appreciation for them. Though I did not select the same specific disciplines as Gunnells did for his research, I

⁵ Gunnells, "Forming Leaders Through Spiritual Disciplines," 52.

⁶ Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as If the Church Mattered*, 23.

⁷ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 315.

⁸ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 123.

did follow his method of engaging each discipline through instruction, group practice, sharing together, and “take-home” assignments.⁹

A third task of the design phase was to develop the assessment tools that would evaluate the success of the project. The first tool that I developed, the Spiritual Formation Assessment Survey, included a list of twenty-five questions on a basic Likert scale (5- Strongly Agree, 4- Agree, 3- Undecided, 2- Disagree, and 1- Strongly Disagree). Five questions addressing each of the four specific disciplines (Bible study, meditative reading, prayer, and service together) were included as well as another five questions addressing spiritual formation in general.¹⁰ I was informed in this approach by the work of Lynn Underwood’s DSE Scale. Underwood’s DSE Scale was developed to measure one’s “daily spiritual experience” through a set of sixteen “little questions that can make a big difference.”¹¹ It has been used in several research projects, including Travis Sharpe’s, whom I found to be very gracious in speaking with me about his work.¹²

In the end, I followed a format similar to Timothy Gunnells’ research¹³ and decided not to use the Underwood scale, but to develop my own because of the specific goals of my project. I wanted to assess: (1) participants’ understanding of the disciplines

⁹ Gunnells, “Forming Leaders Through Spiritual Disciplines,” 53.

¹⁰ See Appendix B for the Spiritual Growth Assessment Survey.

¹¹ Lynn Underwood. *Spiritual Connection in Daily Life. 16 Little Questions That Can Make a Big Difference*. (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2013). The assessment itself can be found at www.dsescala.org

¹² Travis Sharpe. “Discipleship Programs and Spiritual Formation: Does a Discipleship Program at Grace Bridge Church Combining a Missional/Narrative Hermeneutic with Spiritual Disciplines Lead to a Noticeable Change in Love of God and Others?” D. Min. diss., Hazelip School of Theology at Lipscomb University, 2015.

¹³ Gunnells, “Forming Leaders Through Spiritual Disciplines.”

and spiritual formation; (2) participants' practice of the specific spiritual disciplines; and (3) participants' personal spiritual growth thru the disciplines. From these goals, I decided to look at five categories related to each discipline: (1) understanding of; (2) valuing of; (3) practice of; (4) satisfaction with; and (5) general feeling of closeness to God. I then developed five specific questions and applied them to each of the four disciplines to create my survey. I asked participants to evaluate the following statements for each of the four disciplines (Bible study, meditative reading, prayer, serving) using a simple Likert scale.

1. I think I have a good understanding of _____ as it relates to my spiritual journey.
2. I value the discipline of _____ as important to my spiritual journey.
3. I practice the discipline of _____ regularly to grow in my relationship with God.
4. I feel satisfied with my current practice of _____.
5. I feel closer to God because of my practice of _____.

This resulted in a list of twenty questions. I field-tested the assessment survey by asking each of the elders at Washington Street to take it and provide feedback. Based on their suggestions, I clarified several questions and added five additional questions to assess spiritual formation in general.

1. I think I have a good understanding of spiritual formation.
2. I feel like I know what I can do to grow in my spiritual life.
3. I have people who encourage me in my spiritual life.
4. I feel as if I am growing in my relationship with God and in greater Christ-likeness.
5. I want to grow in my relationship with God and in greater Christ-likeness.

The second assessment tool was a feedback questionnaire which included six open-ended questions designed to elicit suggestions for improving the program for future implementations.¹⁴ The third assessment tool I decided to utilize was a journal of field

¹⁴ See Appendix C for the Cohort Feedback Questionnaire

notes which I would keep throughout each session of the implementation phase. Thoughts, insights, and comments from participants would be recorded for later evaluation. The assessment tools, an informed consent form, and a request for exemption were sent to the IRB of Harding University in July 2021. Approval was given in October 2021 to begin.

Another task of the design phase was the recruitment of participants for the group itself. I began by asking the elders for their suggestions. There was a desire for the initial cohort to be composed of active members, both men, and women, who are leaders and persons of influence within the congregation. Participants were then chosen based on interest and desire for spiritual growth. Several members had informally expressed an interest in my project, so I began with them. Invitations were extended informally through conversations that I initiated. The timing of the cohort and the desire to keep the group small limited the ability to get volunteers from different demographic groups represented in the church. Participants included twelve members of the congregation. In addition, I served as a facilitator. This resulted in the group being composed of seven men, including myself, and six women. All were active members of the Washington Street Church of Christ. Eleven of the participants were married. One was single. Two of the participants were in their sixties, five were in their fifties, and two were in their twenties. The group included one deacon and one former elder. I have chosen not to provide more detailed information that would identify them further for the sake of privacy.

Number of Participants	Age Range
2	60+
5	50's
4	40's
0	30's
2	20's
0	Teens

The final task of the design phase was to choose a name for the program and a unique identifying “brand” to enhance the presentation to the congregation. I chose the term *Formatio*, the Latin term for formation, as the name for the program. I designed a logo, utilizing online resources, to give the program a unique look and to communicate the program’s goal through the overarching metaphor of a journey.¹⁵ Thus, the program was dubbed *Formatio: The Journey of Spiritual Formation*. Following the example of Gunnells, I also developed a page on the church’s website to serve as a central location for the gathering of materials, assessments, and resources for the group.¹⁶

Implementation Phase:

The implementation phase was marked by the group’s first meeting on March 9, 2022. In the week before the meeting, I had sent each participant a pre-assessment tool to gauge the participant’s understanding of and practice of each discipline. This was to be compared to the same set of questions at the end of the cohort to assess growth. I also sent them an informed consent form.¹⁷ Each group meeting was held at 7:00 pm on

¹⁵ The metaphor of a journey described by Mulholland and Barton resonated with my own personal experience of spiritual formation. See Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*.

¹⁶ The site was live at <https://www.wscoc.net/ministries/formatio.cfm> throughout the duration of the cohort but has since been removed.

¹⁷ See Appendix E.

Wednesday evenings, the standard time of our mid-week services. We met each week for a total of nine sessions. We met in a large classroom to allow for proper social distancing and to enhance everyone's level of comfort in meeting together. I arranged the chairs in a circle to facilitate conversation and enhance group dynamics. The remainder of this chapter presents the specifics of the curriculum and each session in greater detail.¹⁸

The Curriculum

Each session of the cohort was designed with time for teaching, group practice, and group reflection. The first session served as a general introduction to the program and a discussion of spiritual formation in general. The second and third sessions focused on the discipline of Bible study and presented two different approaches. The fourth and fifth sessions focused on meditative reading, specifically the practices of *lectio divina* and dwelling in the word. The sixth and seven sessions focused on prayer with an emphasis on contemplative approaches such as *breath prayer* and the *daily examen*. The eighth session was a time of serving together. The final session was set aside for reflection, review, and discussion on how we might incorporate these practices into our daily routines.

Session One: An Invitation to a Journey

After collecting the pre-assessment and informed consent forms, completed before the first meeting, I thanked everyone for their willingness to participate in the cohort and for their interest in spiritual formation. I welcomed them and invited them to be a part of a journey we would all take together, a journey into the heart of God, and into an experience of strengthening faith and growing in spiritual maturity. I explained, a

¹⁸ See Appendix F for the group curriculum notebook.

cohort is a group of people banded together for a common purpose. Our purpose, over the course of the following several weeks, would be to grow in our relationship with God and towards greater Christ-likeness together. I introduced the term *Formatio* and explained that is the Latin term for *formation*.

I identified four goals for our sessions together: (1) We will grow in a greater understanding of spiritual formation together; (2) We will be equipped with spiritual practices to further develop towards this growth; (3) We will be a supportive community as we engage in these practices together; and (4) We will actively encourage one another towards spiritual growth.

Since spiritual formation is a vague term to some, we read several texts together to introduce the concept and establish a common theological understanding. The language of “shaping” and “being formed” is used by both Isaiah and Jeremiah in the Old Testament. Isaiah draws upon the image of a potter shaping his clay and likens it to the way in which God shapes his people. “We are all the work of your hand,” he writes (Isa. 64:8). Jeremiah expands upon this image by describing the clay becoming misshapen or marred in the potter’s hand. Not to be deterred, the potter re-shapes it into another pot, “shaping it as seemed best to him” (Jer. 18:2). This metaphor of God shaping his people, ourselves being shaped by the intentionality of God, provides a great theological basis on which to discuss how God has shaped us.

I further explained to the group that the language of spiritual formation is essentially derived from Paul’s language in his epistles. Though the term spiritual formation, itself, is not specifically used, Paul often uses the language of formation and transformation. I provided some examples. In Gal. 4:19, Paul expresses his desire for

Christ to be “formed in you.” He draws upon the analogy of childbirth and speaks of the “pains” with which he waits as the Galatians are being shaped into the likeness of Jesus. In Rom. 12:2, he admonishes his readers not to be conformed to the pattern of the world, but to be transformed by the renewing of your mind. In each case, Paul uses various derivations of the Greek term *morpheuo*, “to change or to form.” In 2 Cor. 3:18, he envisions a moral transformation in the present, literally a “meta-morphosis,” as a prelude to the ultimate transformation at the end.¹⁹ This final transformation is spoken of in 1 Cor. 15:51, “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed.”

To further clarify the concept of spiritual formation and provide a deeper understanding of how it occurs, I shared six key components of spiritual formation. These were summaries of key points from *Chapter Two: Towards a Theology of Spiritual Formation*. They were: (1) spiritual formation is a process; (2) spiritual formation is a communal process; (3) spiritual formation is a process directed by the Holy Spirit; (4) the goal of spiritual formation is to grow in Christ-likeness; (5) spiritual formation is not an end unto itself but is intended for the sake of others; and (6) spiritual formation is an intentional process. Since the primary goal of each session is to introduce practices to be engaged in together, I did not spend a large amount of time unpacking each of these theological concepts at this time. Instead, we would revisit these ideas as the sessions progressed.

Finally, I brought to the group the *Reveal/Move* research from the Willow Creek Church and shared its findings. Church attendance and even church participation does not

¹⁹ Thompson, *Moral Formation According to Paul*, 3.

independently produce spiritually mature disciples.²⁰ They identified twenty-five practices that they found to spur spiritual growth from one level of maturity to the next.²¹ For this project, I suggested that we would focus on only four which were shown to be the most impactful. I chose these also because they seemed most practical for us, given our time constraints. These were: (1) Bible study; (2) meditative reading; (3) prayer; and (4) serving others. These are practices which take us into the very heart of God. Through prayer we speak to God and sit in his presence. Through Bible study and meditative reading, we seek to listen to God's voice. In serving others, we model the example of Jesus. In the upcoming sessions, we would plan to spend two weeks on each practice with the final week being a time of reflection.

I designated time for group discussion and reflection on what we had read and discussed together because I desired for participants to feel open about sharing out of their own experiences. I asked several open-ended questions: (1) What do you see as God's goal for you as a disciple? (2) Looking back over your life, what experiences and practices have most shaped you as a disciple of Jesus? (3) Share a time when you felt especially close to God and growing in your faith. What differentiated this time from other times? What was going on in your life during this time? Why do you think this time was especially fruitful? (4) What practices do you find helpful for drawing you closer to the Lord and for strengthening your faith?

The group responded well to this format. There was ample group discussion and a good amount of openness to these questions. One member stated a desire to "get back on

²⁰ Hawkins et al., *Reveal*, 31.

²¹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 123.

track spiritually” as a personal goal. Another admitted the difficulty of assessing spiritual growth but expressed hope that this program could “make it more accessible.” One mentioned the need to make oneself “open and pliable” to the working of the Spirit throughout this process. Another stated the importance of the clay staying soft in order to be formed. I emphasized that we are all being shaped by something, either this world or by Christ, and that this is of paramount importance. One of the best comments of the evening came from one of the participants, “Is spiritual formation something you do or something that happens to you?” This led into a further discussion of the specific practices. I reached back to the key components presented earlier to explore that question further. I wanted to emphasize it is a process that is both led by the Holy Spirit and brought about through intentional effort.

Members of the group shared several practices that they have found to be spiritually formative. This included prayer, memorizing Scripture, serving, serving with others, taking time off to practice Sabbath, and stepping out on faith in difficult circumstances. Each member was affirmed as they shared and found general agreement. As a “take home activity,” I assigned each participant to take home and complete a *Spiritual Discipline Preference Test* (prepared by Dr. Mark Adams)²² and to reflect upon the various disciplines identified as formative for them. This would be discussed in Session Two.

Session Two: Bible Study

I began session two with a short recap of the first session emphasizing that spiritual growth is an intentional process. Even though primarily a work of the Spirit,

²² Available in Appendix D (used by permission).

spiritual growth cannot happen unless there is intentional action on our part. Spiritual disciplines are those intentional exercises known to facilitate growth and lead one toward greater maturity and Christ-likeness. Paul, in his letter to Timothy, includes this encouragement:

Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come” (1 Tim. 4:7-8).

I explained that spiritual disciplines can be thought of as training exercises, which can produce in us greater godliness. These are how we make ourselves available to God for him to shape us and transform us into greater Christ-likeness.

The first discipline we undertook was also the most familiar, Bible study. In Rom. 12:2, Paul states that we are transformed “through the renewing of the mind.” Richard Foster describes study as “a specific kind of experience in which through careful attention to reality, the mind is enabled to move in a certain direction.”²³ Study is about bringing the faculties of the mind to bear on Scripture for greater understanding and application of God’s Word for us. It is vital for spiritual formation. Jesus made it unmistakably clear that it is knowledge of the truth that will set us free (John 8:32). Knowledge is gained through study. Foster agrees, “Good feelings will not free us. Ecstatic experiences will not free us. Getting ‘high on Jesus’ will not free us. Without a knowledge of the truth, we will not be free.”²⁴

²³ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 63.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Foster describes four steps involved in Bible study: (1) repetition; (2) concentration; (3) comprehension; and (4) reflection. Repetition is the regularly rehearsing of Scripture to aid in ingraining habits of thought and in changing behavior. Concentration is the centering and focusing of the mind upon the text in order to produce learning and insight. Comprehension is the understanding of, the grasping the meaning of a text. Reflection is realizing the significance of a text which leads to a greater understanding of ourselves. It also provides a clearer understanding of God's perspective.²⁵

I discussed that the two primary tasks in Bible study are: (1) *exegesis*; and (2) *hermeneutics*. *Exegesis* is the process of asking, "What does this text say?" It is about discerning the intended meaning of a text in its original context. This involves the consideration of background, culture, and language to arrive at what the text would have meant to its original audience. *Hermeneutics*, on the other hand, is that further step of asking, "What does this mean for me or for us today?" It is the process of application, applying the meaning uncovered in exegesis to one's contemporary context. This is interpretation and must consider the various cultural, temporal, and contextual differences in our contemporary setting. I am indebted to Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart for their book, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, and referred the group to it for further elaboration of these important ideas.²⁶ It is a very helpful resource, especially for beginning, but thoughtful, Bible students.

²⁵ Ibid., 63–64.

²⁶ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 19–27.

In addition to 1 Tim. 4:7-8 and Rom. 12:2, we read together several texts and discussed their relevance to the discipline of Bible study. In 2 Tim. 2:15, Paul admonishes Timothy to “correctly handle the word of truth.” The reader’s responsibility to read accurately and make appropriate application were deemed extremely important. From 2 Tim. 3, the authority and purpose of the text were mentioned. It is “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). We discussed the importance of placing ourselves, as disciples of Jesus, under the authority of the text, submitting to it as well as putting it “into practice” (Phil. 4:8).

I presented, as one method of Bible study, a simple way of engaging the text known popularly as the “Discovery Bible Study” or *DBS*. It has become popular among some churches and disciple-making movements both in the United States and abroad.²⁷ It is not without its critics, however.²⁸ It is particularly useful for groups but can be practiced privately as well. The process is simple. After a period of prayer (group or individual), the selected text is read aloud. The selection can be a small section of a few verses or an entire chapter. It ought to be enough to elicit good discussion or thought but need not be too lengthy. The study then flows out of the following questions applied to the text: (1) What do we learn about God, his nature, character, or plan from this text? (2) What do we learn about ourselves, our nature, our weaknesses, or our needs? (3) How do I need to respond to this text? (4) Who will I share this with this week?

²⁷ Walker family (Pseudonym), “South Asia: God’s Kingdom Advancing Through Discovery Bible Studies,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (September 2019): 25–27.

²⁸ For a critique of this popular method, see Aubry Smith, “Disembodied Discipleship: A Critique of the Discovery Bible Study,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (June 2021): 7–9.

In addition to these standard questions, I suggested four additional open-ended questions intended to elicit even greater opportunities for discussion and depth of insight. These were: (5) What do I find appealing in this text? (6) What do I find challenging in this text? (7) What in this text did I find hard to understand? (8) How might I summarize the overall message of this text in my own words, as few as possible? I then took the group through a demonstration of the exercise. We read 2 Tim. 3:16-17 again together, and talked through briefly each of the eight questions, applying them to the text. Time did not allow for us to have a full discussion based on the DBS method. It did, however, give the group a sense of how they could practice it on their own.

We concluded our time with reflection questions intended to spur the group to think critically about their own personal Bible study habits and be open with the group. These were: (1) What Bible study methods have been most beneficial to you? Have you found an approach that best suits you? (2) What does your practice of Bible study look like? What habits have you cultivated? (3) What tools do you most often use in your study (commentaries, Bible dictionaries, online resources)? Members shared from their own experiences those practices which had been most beneficial to them in the past.

A “take-home activity” was assigned to encourage each participant to practice the discipline further throughout the next week. I prepared a handout that divided the first seven chapters of Matthew into seven days and provided space for each participant to read a chapter per day, move through each of the eight questions, and make notes for themselves. I explained that we would begin the next session with a time of sharing about how this has gone. We closed in prayer and asked God’s voice to speak to us through our study of his Word over the next week.

Session Three: Bible Study

We began session three with prayer over the needs and concerns shared by members of the group. One goal for this cohort is to foster a sense of encouraging community among its members, so this time was very important. I then shared some thoughts on the spiritual benefits of Bible study from Adele Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*.²⁹ I like her perspective on the role of the disciplines, "[The Spiritual Disciplines] simply put us in a place where we can begin to notice God and respond to his word to us."³⁰ We then revisited our previous session to share how everyone's experiences had gone practicing the DBS method of Bible Study outlined in session two. The first two sessions had been heavily weighted with material that I presented, so I wanted this session to include more time for sharing and discussion. It was important that the group walk through these disciplines together and share personal insights for greater encouragement.

I came prepared with several debriefing questions to elicit productive discussion. These were: (1) What was the most difficult or challenging thing for you about the practice of Bible study this week? (2) What was the most rewarding thing for you about this practice? (3) Tell us about any "aha" moments or insights you might have had in your practice this week. (4) How was this practice different for you, or was it? Describe your regular or typical practice of Bible study and how it was different. (5) What challenges or obstacles did you face in your practice? Did it have to do with time management, focus or attention, distractions, or inability to access the text for

²⁹ Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 184–186.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

understanding? (6) Did you consult any Bible helps (other translations, dictionaries, encyclopedias, online tools, etc.)? I followed this discussion, which took much of our time, by sharing two short videos of Bible scholars talking about their practice of studying the Bible, N.T. Wright and Bob Young.³¹ There was a brief discussion regarding insights from each video.

After this time of debriefing and discussion, we walked through another text together using the same method, Matt. 7:1-12. My goal was to provide a second demonstration and give each participant more confidence in their own approach. As a second homework assignment, I suggested that we take another approach to our Bible study for the next week. I assigned them to read one book (Colossians) all the way through in one sitting at least three times before the next week. I did this to provide another way of approaching Scripture, one which might help them see the greater context of a text. I provided space on their weekly handout to jot down notes for each reading. We closed with prayer, again asking God to speak to us and to change us through the reading of His Word.

Session Four: Meditative Reading

As was now our custom, we began the fourth session with a prayer over concerns and celebrations from within the group. We then moved to a time debrief regarding last week's exercise. I asked the following questions: (1) What was the most difficult or challenging thing about reading an entire section or book multiple times this week? (2) What was the most rewarding? (3) Describe any "aha" moments or insights you may have received in your reading. (4) In what ways did you find this approach different from

³¹ "WinterfestConference - YouTube," accessed October 25, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/>.

the previous approach of reading thru a smaller section or book piece by piece? There was good discussion as members made observations by contrasting the different ways in which they had been accustomed to practicing Bible study. I intended to get them to think intentionally about how they read Scripture.

I then introduced the concept of a meditative approach to reading Scripture. Very often we are taught to read the Bible to understand facts and to gain knowledge. This is what our prior practice had focused on. This is a valuable approach. I suggested, however, that it is possible to acquire knowledge without the Scriptures really changing us. Reading Scripture from the perspective of intellectual analysis only can be quite dangerous.³² I cited the example of the Pharisees. Jesus, himself, had described them as being guilty of “studying the Scriptures diligently” because they thought they had eternal life in them, but still missing the one, true source of life (John 5:39-40). Our study of Scripture cannot stop at “head knowledge” but must also affect our hearts and lives. God wants to change the lives of his people through Scripture. Thus, the practice of meditative reading or *lectio divina* has been a time-honored discipline that Christians have practiced for centuries as a more “heart-oriented” approach. Christopher Hall describes it as, “a slow, paced, meditative reading of Scripture, a method of reading the text of the Bible [...] in which the specific goal [...] is ever deeper transformation into the image of Christ.”³³

³² Christopher A. Hall, “Reading Christ into the Heart: The Theological Foundations of Lectio Divina,” in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 143.

³³ *Ibid.*, 144.

In *lectio divina*, instead of seeking knowledge alone, participants seek to allow the words of Scripture to saturate their lives. It is the taking-in of Scripture, “chewing on it,” digesting the words into our bodies, and allowing them to nourish our souls.³⁴ Eugene Peterson likens the “growling” and “savoring” of his dog over a bone to this type of reading.³⁵ Indeed, the Hebrew word translated as *meditate* in Ps. 1:2 (“[Blessed is the man] whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, he meditates day and night”) is the word *hagah*. The same word, *hagah*, is translated as *growl* in Isa. 31:4, “as a lion or a young lion growls over his prey...” The Scripture is to be devoured and savored. The prophet Ezekiel draws upon this sort of imagery.

“Son of man,” He said to me, “eat what you find here. Eat this scroll, then go and speak to the house of Israel.” So, I opened my mouth, and He fed me the scroll. “Son of man,” He said to me, “eat and fill your stomach with this scroll I am giving you.” So I ate, and it was as sweet as honey in my mouth (Ezek. 3:1-3).

I also pointed the group to Ps. 119 and the psalmist’s words in verse 11, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” This calls for more than memorization of the text. This is allowing the text to change us and become a part of us.

This devotional reading approach should be done slowly with a short passage of no more than six to eight verses. The goal is not to cover a lot of ground, but rather to take the time to allow the Word of God to sink deeply into our minds and hearts. I then presented the group with a simplified approach to practicing meditative reading based on Calhoun’s discussion as well as that of Marjorie Thompson.³⁶ I offered some brief

³⁴ Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 17.

³⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 2.

³⁶ Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 188–191; Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 22–25.

instructions for the exercise such as: (1) find a comfortable, well-lit reading position; and (2) select an appropriate passage of Scripture, not too long, but not too short. I gave a short description of the four “movements” of *lectio divina* to provide a sense of its purpose. We then selected the twenty-third psalm as an ideal text with which to begin and I led the group through each of the movements, carefully explaining each as we went.

The first movement is simply to listen (*lectio*). Enter into the moment with an open heart, expecting to hear from God. Approach the text like the young Samuel who, when God called his name, was taught to respond, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (2 Sam. 3:9). One wants to enter the text with a posture of openness and expectant listening. Then read through the passage paying attention to what is being said in the text.

The second movement is to meditate (*meditatio*) upon what has just been heard as it is read a second time. This time I challenged them to listen for specific words or phrases which captured their attention or imagination. Did something stand out? Did something resonate in a new or special way this time? Did something disturb or challenge them? I asked them to listen for that word or phrase and latch on to it, roll it over in their mind over and over, reflecting on it and meditating upon its meaning. In our practice of the exercise, I opened the floor and invited participants to speak aloud that word or phrase and to share it with the group. I suggested that when practicing it alone, perhaps writing it out on a notecard to be carried with you throughout the day might be helpful.

The third movement is to respond in prayer (*oratio*) to what has been heard and especially to the specific word that has been received. We entered into several minutes of silence as I invited the group to pray silently about what they have just heard and

received. I suggested that God's Word calls for a response on our part. It could be to praise and to thank God for a blessing. It could be to confess wrongdoing. Perhaps the word has brought something to light in one's life that calls for repentance. Three to four minutes were given for this time of personal prayer and then I led a prayer over the group in response to what we had heard and shared.

The fourth movement is contemplation (*contemplatio*). The text was read a final time, this time I asked the group to sit with their reflections and think about how it connects with their lives. What are its implications? How is God communicating through this word? What does it mean personally? Communally? We were challenged to take this word with us as we departed.

After practicing the exercise together for the first time, I wanted to save some time for group discussion. I had prepared five questions: (1) What did you find helpful about this practice? (2) Was there anything about this practice strange or awkward for you? (3) What about this practice was different from how you usually approach Scripture? (4) Could you see yourself doing this practice regularly? Time did not allow us to completely cover every question, but each participant had an opportunity to share how they felt about the experience.

For homework, I asked each participant to select other texts and set aside time each day over the next week to practice meditative reading. In addition to Ps. 23, I suggested Philippians 4:4-9 and Ps. 51 as other good texts to try. We closed in prayer, expressing gratitude for the word from the Lord that we had received.

Session Five: Dwelling in the Word

The fifth session was begun with prayer and then flowed into a discussion time reflecting on the group's practice of meditative reading from the previous week. I brought several questions to the group, much like in previous sessions: (1) Share about your practice this week of meditative reading. How did it go? (2) What texts did you select and how were they beneficial? (3) Did you find it helpful in any way? Was it challenging? (4) Did you feel any awkwardness at first? How did that change the more you practiced it? The group spent most of our time sharing and discussing together how their experiences had gone.

I suggested two additional Scriptures as an encouragement to continue in this practice of meditative reading and to further ground our practice in Scripture itself.

Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful (Josh. 1:8).

On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night. Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings. I cling to you; your right hand upholds me (Ps. 63:6-8).

As we discussed this practice together, I attempted to further differentiate Christian meditation as opposed to other types of meditation. I clarified that Christian meditation is not about "emptying" one's mind but opening oneself to the mind of God and his world.³⁷ We also identified obstacles and distractions that make this practice particularly challenging. Other texts were suggested as beneficial possibilities for meditation. These included Psalms 42, 86, 136, and Matt. 5:1-16 as well as Matt. 6:9-13.

³⁷ Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 192.

For the week's homework assignment, I asked the group to continue practicing meditative reading throughout the next week. For this second week, however, I asked them not to choose a different verse each time, but to take just one passage of Scripture and return to it at least three or four times over the next week. This variation of "dwelling in the Word" is recommended by Zscheille as especially beneficial. "The Bible begins to speak to people in new and fresh ways- ways that typically invite them to learn more and to engage more deeply, including through pursuing more traditional methods of study."³⁸ We closed with a prayer that God would continue to speak and to move in our hearts through the practice of meditative reading.

Session Six: Contemplative Prayer-- *Breath Prayer*

After two weeks focusing on Bible study and two weeks focusing on meditative reading, we entered into our sixth session ready to focus on the third of our disciplines, prayer. First, however, we shared a period of prayer and discussion based on our practice of dwelling in the Word from the previous week. I asked how this practice, focusing on a sole verse for the week, was different for them from the prior practice of meditative reading over multiple verses. I found the group members to be growing in their openness in sharing their thoughts and being honest about their opinions, while also greatly respecting one another's points of view.

Prayer was identified as a major catalyst for spiritual growth in the *Reveal/Move* research, but no further direction regarding what type of prayer was specifically described by its authors.³⁹ I felt this was a good opportunity for us to explore two

³⁸ Dwight J. Zscheille, "Dwelling in the Word: Affirming Its Promise," *Word & World* 32, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 410.

³⁹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 123.

different types of prayer that may be unfamiliar. In my experience, new approaches to well-practiced disciplines can be helpful. I introduced to the group the idea of contemplative prayer and suggested that the purpose of prayer is not primarily for us to petition God for things, though there are certainly appropriate times to do that. The purpose of prayer is primarily to connect with God and to be with him, to abide in his presence. This may or may not even involve words. The presence of God is sought in this type of contemplative prayer.

Contemplative prayer is sometimes thought of as “passive” prayer as opposed to “active” prayer. Active prayer would be prayer in which the pray-er sets the agenda and decides the content. I leaned heavily on Jackie L. Halstead’s *Leaning into God’s Embrace* to describe these ideas. She writes:

Contemplative prayer, on the other hand, is the listening side of prayer. It is being with God in a manner that allows God to set the agenda. In his book, *Living in the Presence*, Tilden Edwards states that contemplative prayer is about being still and letting God answer, sometimes with words but most often with a loving presence.⁴⁰

Thus, I invited the group to look at two specific types of contemplative prayer, (1) *breath prayer*; and (2) the *daily examen*. I began with breath prayer because it seemed to be the simplest and also followed nicely from our previous practice of meditating on the Word. They are both very similar. Breath prayer is a simple approach to prayer that allows the words of Scripture to form our prayer as a way to center our thoughts on God.

Breath prayers are short, mostly one-sentence, prayers that believers in God have been praying for centuries. These prayers are often repeated, and they are often aligned

⁴⁰ Halstead, *Leaning into God’s Embrace*, 15.

with a person's breathing so that the first half of a sentence is prayed while inhaling and the second half of the sentence is prayed while exhaling.⁴¹

One of the most well-known and often-practiced breath prayers is called "The Jesus Prayer." It is a combination of several texts from the Gospels and is simply, "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner," or some variation. Matt. 9:27, Mark 10:47, and Luke 18:38 record this plea coming from blind men. The Canaanite woman in Matt. 15:22 as well as lepers in Luke 17:13 voice it as well. The early church fathers adopted the practice, and it became the most famous of the monastic prayers, still practiced in today's Eastern church.⁴²

In addition to these, I also presented three additional texts which we read together. In Luke 18:1 Jesus told his disciples a parable to encourage them to be persistent in prayer, and not to give up. Paul gives a similar admonition in 1 Thess. 5:17, "Pray without ceasing." A third admonition from Scripture reminds believers to pray in every circumstance, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Phil. 4:6).

I demonstrated this exercise to the group by inviting them to pray "The Jesus Prayer" with me as a breath prayer. I offered these words of instruction:

Spend the next five to ten minutes silently repeating this prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." As you breathe IN, pray the first phrase silently before God. As you breathe OUT, pray the next. Continue as your prayer aligns with the rhythm of your breathing. As you pray, think about God's mercy that is extended to us every time we breathe. Celebrate God's gift of life today in the rhythm of this breath prayer. Reflect on how this experience has blessed you. Discuss it with the group or journal about it privately.

⁴¹ Heflin, *Pray Like You Breathe: Exploring the Practice of Breath Prayer*, 11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 15–16; 18–19.

After we practiced breath prayer together, I offered several questions for group discussion: (1) Was it hard for you to sync your breathing patterns with the prayer of the verse? What made it challenging or distracting for you? (2) How might this be a way to “pray without ceasing” as Paul admonished? (3) How do you see this practice enhancing your present prayer life? (4) What other examples of short, repetitive prayers can you think of from the Bible? We discussed and shared.

Before discussing homework and dismissing in prayer, we discussed several benefits to this type of prayer: (1) It helps us learn Scripture. (2) It helps us focus our attention. (3) It gives us words to say in prayer. (4) It serves to remind us to return to God throughout the day. The Psalter is full of Scriptures that can easily serve as breath prayers (Ps. 23:1; 51:10; 86:4; 119:11). As a homework activity, I challenged the group to select one of the above verses and make it a breath prayer throughout the week. We dismissed in a short prayer of thanksgiving for the time spent in communion with God that evening.

Session Seven: Contemplative Prayer-- *The Daily Examen*

For the seventh session, I wanted to further our discussion and practice of contemplative prayer by introducing the idea of *daily examen*. First, we began with a prayer over the needs and concerns of the group and then spent several minutes discussing one another’s reaction to last week’s breath prayer exercise. I read Ps. 139:1-4 to set the stage, “O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.” Discussion questions were: (1) Share about your practice of contemplative prayer this week. How did your experience go? (2) How did you find this to enhance your time of prayer or meditation? Did you find yourself coming back to your Scripture prayer throughout the day? (3) What Scriptures

did you choose for your breath prayers? (4) Is this something that you see could become a part of your routine of devotion?

I was pleased that most of the participants in the group seemed to appreciate the breath prayer exercise. It had come at a much-needed time, one member confided to the group. A health scare in the family had drawn her to the exercise often throughout the week and it had provided much comfort.

I told the group that to continue our exploration of prayer I wanted to introduce them to the daily examen. The daily examen is an exercise of self-reflection which finds its roots in the spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556 AD).⁴³ Halstead provides a good introduction to the life of Ignatius.⁴⁴ He lived a pagan life as a young man in sixteenth-century Spain. He had all the advantages of wealth and a place in the royal court as an apprentice to the king's treasurer. He was said to be vain, flirtatious with the ladies, and valiant in battle. His demeanor changed, however, after being injured in battle and spending a year in convalescence in his family's castle. He had little to distract him, save two books on the life of Christ and the lives of the saints. He spent hour upon hour devouring them and imagining his life in service to the Lord. After giving himself to the Lord's service in the church, he dedicated himself to the development of a program of prayer that would draw participants closer to God and into greater spiritual maturity and Christ-likeness. The practice of the daily examen derives from his work.

⁴³ Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, ed. Anthony Mottola (New York, NY: Image Books, 2014).

⁴⁴ Halstead, *Leaning into God's Embrace*, 41–42.

The goal of the daily examen is to notice where God shows up in our day.⁴⁵

Through a series of questions, the individual reflects upon their day looking intentionally for moments when God's presence seemed especially clear, moments for which to be thankful, acts which need to be confessed towards forgiveness, and reasons for hope. It is a prayerful exercise as each of these moments are brought to the Lord and dealt with appropriately. It can be practiced alone in silence or as a group. It can be practiced any time throughout the day, but many had found it particularly helpful either at morning or evening times. It could also be practiced to include larger amounts of time, perhaps a week, a month, or even a year to reflect back upon.

We read the following texts and discussed together how each one related to self-examination: Matt. 7:1-5; 1 Cor. 11:31-32; and 2 Cor. 13:5. I then led the group through five series of self-reflective questions as a demonstration of daily examen allowing for several moments between each series.

Series one: In silence reflect upon your day retracing your steps from morning till evening. Ask God to help you recall to mind the countless moments you spent in your day. Where did you go? What jobs or tasks did you do? Who did you interact with throughout the day? How did you spend your day? Ask yourself, where did I feel God's presence? Where did I not feel his presence?

Series two: As you review your day look for moments for which to give thanks, considering them as gifts from God, moments that brought you joy or pleasure. Life-giving moments. Maybe it was the aroma of coffee brewing in the morning, a smile from a coworker, or a beautiful rainbow or sunset? Maybe it was an opportunity you had to be helpful and bless someone else. Express your thanksgiving to God for these gifts. When did you give and receive the most love? When today did you have the deepest sense of connection with God... with others... with yourself?

Series three: Next, reflect on moments in your day that brought you sorrow or pain, or frustration. Things which were "life-taking" from you. Maybe it was criticism from someone or a harsh word you spoke to another. Maybe it was a disappointment at work or school. Maybe it was a missed opportunity or a failure to speak a word for Him. When

⁴⁵ Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 59.

did you give and receive the least love today? When today did you feel most disconnected from God... from others... even from yourself?

Series four: Ask God to show you things in your day for which you need forgiveness. These may be words said (or left unsaid), or actions you need to bring before God in confession. Where was I aware of living out of the fruit of the Spirit... or an absence of the fruit of the Spirit?

Series five: After you have sought God's forgiveness, intentionally receive it and express thanksgiving. Ask God to help you as you look forward to a new day and new opportunities. Where will you seek God tomorrow and where will you look for him to show up?⁴⁶

Following this exercise together, allowing for ample times of silence between series, I posed to the group several questions for discussion: (1) How do you tend to recognize God's presence in your day? How do you typically respond? (2) What insights about yourself and God did you have in this practice? (3) What are your biggest personal reasons for not spending more time in self-examination? How might you work to overcome these? (4) If you were to practice a variation of this exercise reflecting on the past week or the past month or year, how might it go?

As a take-home exercise, I challenged each one to repeat this exercise "several times" throughout the coming week. I was not specific as to the number of times and left that to the discretion of each participant. I advised that they could choose any time that worked best for them, but to take time to journal or write notes about their experience and any insights that arose out of the practice. We closed with prayer with thanksgiving for the insights which had arisen out of our daily examen.

⁴⁶ The specific wording here was my own but was heavily influenced by Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 58-61, and Halstead, *Leaning into God's Embrace*, 140-143.

Session Eight: Serving Together

Our eighth session focused on the discipline of serving together. We began with prayer over the concerns of the group and then quickly moved into a time of discussion regarding our experiences the previous week in the daily examen. I asked three questions: (1) Share about your practice of the prayer of examen this week. How did your experience go? (2) How did you find this to enhance your time of prayer or meditation? Was it hard for you to focus? (3) Is this something that you see could become a part of your regular routine of devotion?

I then introduced the idea of serving as a spiritual discipline. While the practices of engaging Scripture and prayer are powerful exercises of spiritual formation and facilitate much growth in the life of a disciple, it is also true that some people connect best with God by *doing*. Adele Calhoun writes, “Many Americans spend their lives working themselves into a place where they can be served more than serve.”⁴⁷ Indeed, to be “king” or “queen” for a day is everyone’s dream! However, Scripture provides us with a different perspective. When God called Abram and told him that he was going to make him into a great nation, he also said, “all nations on the earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 18:18). The trajectory of the Old Testament story is God blessing the earth through his people. That blessing came, ultimately, in the person and work of Jesus Christ, whose own life served as a living demonstration of sacrificial service.

The discipline of serving others seeks to follow the example of Jesus who came not to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45). Disciples are never more Christ-like than when they are serving others. Bernard of Clairvaux wrote, “Learn the lesson that, if you

⁴⁷ Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 168.

are to do the work of a prophet, what you need is not a scepter but a hoe.”⁴⁸ Serving is an exercise of humility. It is an exercise of generosity, and it is an exercise of submission. It is also an act of mission. “The Christian discipline of service is the way the world discovers the love of God. We are the way God blesses the earth.”⁴⁹

The group read together the following passages and discussed the examples of serving that we observed in the text: John 13:1-17; Mark 10:45; Matt. 25:31-46; Acts 9:36-43. Jesus provides the example for disciples, demonstrating serving through his loving act of humility in washing the disciples’ feet (John 13) and ultimately by his laying down his life “as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). In his great discourse on judgment, he contrasts those who are “goats” from those who are “sheep.” He describes the reward his sheep will receive at the judgment while the goats receive “punishment.” It is a vivid scene of judgment. It is made all the more poignant to realize the basis on which the sheep are differentiated from the goats is in the way they served others.

Then the King will say to those on His right, “Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me” (Matt. 25:35-36).

I pointed out that both the sheep and the goats saw the same need, but it was the sheep who served to meet those needs while the goats did nothing.

Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me” (Matt. 25:41-43).

⁴⁸ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 126.

⁴⁹ Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 168.

Finally, we observed the early church living out this ethic of Jesus throughout the book of Acts, especially in the example of Tabitha, also known as Dorcas. Tabitha was known throughout Joppa for her good deeds, “always doing good and helping the poor” (Acts 6:36-43). When she died, poor widows crowded around her home in grief and tears because she was so dearly loved. The impact of serving others is great in the kingdom of God.

For this session, it was important that we do more than simply talk about the importance of serving, but that we practice the discipline together, as we had done with our previous disciplines. To that end, I volunteered our help at a local crisis pregnancy center. *The Crossroads Pregnancy Center* is a faith-based non-profit agency in our community that provides women’s services at no cost. Their website states:

Crossroads Pregnancy Clinic exists to care for women and men facing unplanned pregnancies by providing life-affirming education through pregnancy decision counseling. Crossroads is a privately funded non-profit organization affiliated with the National Institute of Family Life Advocates and Heartbeat International, both of which provide guidance to pregnancy resource centers across the nation.⁵⁰

Several of our members had volunteered at the clinic and were familiar with its work. One of Crossroads’ ministries is to provide Bibles to women seeking services. Women come, often in crisis situations with unplanned pregnancies. These Bibles are given to them with encouraging, life-affirming verses highlighted. We were asked to help them highlight a selection of verses in several dozen Bibles which had been donated. We set about this enjoyable task together as we talked.

⁵⁰ More can be learned about the Crossroads Pregnancy Clinic at: “About Crossroads Pregnancy Clinic,” *Crossroads Pregnancy Clinic*, accessed October 25, 2022, <https://www.crossroadspregnancyclinic.org/about-us/>.

I used the following set of questions to elicit discussion: (1) How do you feel as you are serving with others? Does it exhaust you or “fill your tank”? (2) How does it feel to be loved by someone “as he or she loves themselves?” (3) Share a favorite memory of serving that impacted your life. (4) What hinders you from serving more regularly and in greater ways? Are you limited in time, energy, etc? How might you be able to free up more time to make serving a higher priority? (5) What would it look like if our church became known, like Dorcas, for “always doing good”?

The work was completed quickly. I had hoped to find something away from the church building and out in the community that we could do together, but the logistics of planning did not allow. In the end, this was a good project for us to do together, as it allowed us to discuss as we worked. I challenged group members, as their homework for the week, to look for more opportunities to serve over the next week, preferably in ways they had not done before. I encouraged them to try something new and, if they were not sure of what to do, to pray about it. The Lord has many opportunities “prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 6:10), if we would but keep our eyes open. We closed with a prayer of thanksgiving for the wonderful privilege of serving the women who will receive the Bibles we worked to highlight and for the children who would be blessed through them.

Session Nine: Reflection

I had originally intended to spend two weeks on each of the disciplines in focus (Bible study, meditative reading, prayer, and service), however, I felt it important to use our final session together to reflect and encourage one another to continue in all of the practices. Thus, after beginning with our customary prayer time, I thanked each of the

members for their participation in this “experiment” in spiritual formation and for all of their efforts made towards it. I expressed my gratitude for their help with my project but more importantly for encouraging me spiritually through the process. I suggested to the group that we use our final time together to celebrate the experience, to reflect back upon our time, and to assess the benefit of our sessions together.

I drew from several questions to guide the discussion: (1) Which of our sessions together were the most helpful to you and why? (2) Which were the least helpful? Why? (3) Which did you find the most challenging? (4) Which do you see yourself continuing to practice and grow in? (5) What comments would you add about each of the practices (Discovery Bible Study, meditative reading, dwelling in the Word, breath prayer, daily examen, serving together)? We spent much of our time openly sharing our personal experiences. This provided me with much insight into how well this experience had benefitted the participants.

Following the group discussion, I handed each member the two assessments and asked them to take some time in the next few days to thoughtfully provide some feedback for this project. I emphasized to them that this was to improve the program for future implementations. The first assessment, the Spiritual Formation Survey, was identical to the survey given prior to the cohort and was to be compared against that first survey to measure any changes that might have occurred during the course of the program. The second assessment, the Cohort Evaluation Questionnaire, was a simple feedback form that asked for suggestions for improvement.

As a final homework assignment, I introduced to the group the idea of a *rule of life*.⁵¹ The word rule comes from the Latin *regula*, from which we get words like “regular” or “regulate.”⁵² Developing a rule of life is a way to organize your life to ensure that you are doing what is important to you and necessary to keep your faith growing and your character strong. A rule of life centers around two questions: (1) Who do I want to be? and (2) How do I want to live? Thus, the question becomes, “How should I live so that I become who I want to be?”

Thus, I assigned members to think of those practices or activities that helped them to grow, then to develop an intentional plan to follow thru and put them into practice regularly. Some may be daily practices, others may be weekly, monthly, or even yearly. I offered the following questions to help spur their thinking: (1) When I want to be closer to God, what practices do I find most helpful? (2) What are problem areas in my life, weaknesses, that need to be changed or redeemed? (3) What activities stretch me as a Christian? (4) When in my life can I realistically make more space for God? (5) How will I hold myself accountable?

Developing such a plan, I suggested, would help them continue in the practices which were most helpful to their spiritual growth, even if they were uncomfortable or new to them. As a final suggestion, I provided each member with a short bibliography of practical and helpful resources with which I had become familiar and which I thought would be most accessible to the members of the group and average church members.⁵³

⁵¹ Mark Adams. Class Lecture Notes, Spiritual & Theological Formation, Harding School of Theology, Fall 2021.

⁵² See also Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 37–41.

⁵³ See Appendix F.

Evaluation and Assessment Phase

At the conclusion of the nine-week cohort, I gathered the responses of the participants and began analyzing the data. I took the responses of the Spiritual Formation Survey and considered the five questions asked of each discipline to assess if the goals of the small group had been met: (1) Had there been any growth in understanding of each discipline? (2) Had there been any growth in the valuing of each discipline? (3) Had there been any growth in the practice of each discipline? (4) Had there been any growth in participants' satisfaction with their practice of the discipline? (5) Had there been any growth in overall closeness with God as a result of each discipline? I specifically focused on the last five questions assessing spiritual formation in general, looking for indications of change in cohort participants. I also collected the Cohort Evaluation Questionnaire forms and, using a simple system of coding, I marked each comment according to the specific discipline referenced. I was especially interested in suggestions for future implementations of the program. I also coded my field notes looking for common themes and key insights to be compared against the feedback questionnaire.⁵⁴ Finally, I reflected on the overall goals of the project: (1) to educate participants in spiritual formation; (2) to equip participants with spiritual practices; and (3) to facilitate spiritual growth in participants. I weighed the collective data to assess if these goals had been met. I will discuss in more depth what I learned from this analysis in chapter four.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the basic process of the design and implementation phases of the project. This included the design of a small group to serve as a context for the

⁵⁴ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 73.

project, the recruitment of participants for the small group, and the development of the curriculum. It also described the implementation of the small group cohort, *Formatio*, over the course of nine weeks in the Spring of 2022. I then described briefly the approach taken in assessing the data collected from the survey, the questionnaire, and personal field notes. I hoped the experience would compel members to continue in the practices we engaged in together (Bible study, meditative reading, prayer, and serving together) and continue in their journey of spiritual formation. I also hoped that this group would spur further such groups and encourage others to participate.

My departure from the congregation immediately following the completion of the cohort will undoubtedly affect what I had hoped would happen. Nonetheless, the seeds sown in the participants of our cohort will no doubt bear much fruit in the future for the congregation. I am thankful that I was able to carry out the implementation in the time before my departure. Upon the completion of the assessment phase, I will share my findings with the elders and discuss with them ways this work might carry on.

Chapter Four

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT: MEASURING SPIRITUAL GROWTH

In chapter one I expressed the need facing many churches, including the Washington Street Church of Christ, to increase spiritual maturity among its members. Toward that goal, I developed a program to facilitate spiritual growth by equipping members with spiritually formative practices. This program utilized the format of a small group cohort to engage in specific spiritually formative practices together. I had three goals for this project. One, I wanted participants to come away with a greater understanding of the process of spiritual formation. Two, I wanted to equip members with spiritually formative practices which they would be able to continue practicing on their own after the project was completed. Three, I wanted to facilitate spiritual growth in each participant. In this chapter, I will assess the effectiveness of this program and evaluate its design and implementation.

Several tools were used to evaluate the project's effectiveness. The first two, the Spiritual Formation Survey and a Cohort Feedback Questionnaire, were to garner the perspective of the participants.¹ The third and fourth, field notes and personal observations, were to record my perspective as a participant researcher.² First, I developed a survey with a set of twenty-five statements with fixed choice responses utilizing a basic Likert scale (1 Strongly Disagree; 2 Disagree; 3 Uncertain; 4 Agree; 5 Strongly Agree).³ This survey was given to participants both before and after the cohort

¹ See Appendices B and C.

² Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 73.

³ *Ibid.*, 115.

experience. Changes in participants' self-reporting were noted and observations were made from these changes. Second, a Cohort Evaluation Questionnaire was given to each participant after the cohort with six open-ended questions designed to produce insights on the format and provide suggestions for future projects. Third, I kept field notes throughout the nine weeks which included major points of discussion at each session, quotes from participants, and any observations or thoughts I had as each session progressed. Finally, I relied on personal observation as a participant observer throughout the process. After the project, I analyzed the data looking for any changes from before and after the group experience. I also coded my field notes and the feedback received from the Cohort Evaluation Questionnaire looking for common themes and key insights.⁴

Evaluating the Design and Implementation

Format and Recruitment of the Group

I chose the format of a small group to be the context for this project. I knew small group dynamics would be important to the project's success.⁵ After consulting with our elders, I personally recruited each member based on their availability and interest in the project. The final group included seven women and five men, plus me. All were active members of the Washington Street Church of Christ. Eleven of the participants were married. One was single. Two were in their sixties. Five were in their fifties. There were four in their forties and two in their twenties. There were none in their thirties nor did the group include any teens. The group included one deacon and one former elder.

⁴ Ibid., 202.

⁵ Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups*, 55.

Table: 4.1 Age Demographics of Participants

Number of Participants	Age Range
2	60+
5	50's
4	40's
0	30's
2	20's
0	Teens

Looking back at the formation of this group, greater effort should have been taken to gather a more diverse population of members. This is a missed opportunity. I should have attempted to diversify the age groups. Older members were overly represented, with ten out of the twelve members being over the age of forty. The group also included no one in their teens or thirties. I noted that the two younger participants were not as vocal in the group as I expected them to be. This could have been the result of having the group weighted towards older members. I agree with the participant who suggested, “In the future, I think it would be beneficial to have a more substantial mix of age demographics to broaden perspectives across generations... and to add more participants on the upper and lower ends of the age spectrum.”⁶ I should have made a greater effort to create a more diverse group with better representation from the congregation. It also might have been more impactful to have additional members of the church’s leadership represented. The elders had each expressed a willingness to participate, but time and other factors prevented them.

I found that limiting the group participants to twelve was an ideal size. I was grateful to have more than enough interest to form a group of twelve and did not want to risk decreasing the effectiveness of group dynamics by increasing it beyond that. Every

⁶ Quotations attributed to participants are taken verbatim from the Cohort Feedback Questionnaire unless otherwise noted.

member actively participated. Everyone seemed to speak freely and openly shared. No one person seemed to dominate the discussion. While some members were naturally more reserved than others, I do not believe this was due to the group being too large, but rather due to personality types. My observation was that the size allowed for robust discussion, even during the sessions when some were absent. One member summed up the strength and weakness of the size, “A slightly smaller group might be more effective, but the variety of thoughts and ideas added to the experience.”

Duration and Session Times

I found the length of nine weeks to be an effective length of time for the cohort. Several participants expressed a desire to continue the cohort after the nine weeks so that more spiritual disciplines could be explored. It was suggested that this might, “allow for a more in-depth look at the disciplines and the participants might feel more comfortable sharing with others.” Nine weeks had been initially selected because it fit well in the church’s education cycle. It would be quite feasible, however, to lengthen the number of sessions going forward and to include additional spiritual disciplines or even to spend more time on the disciplines already chosen. I, personally, would love to explore more of the spiritual practices. Adele Calhoun’s book provides more than enough resources for further sessions.⁷ The need to complete this project and my transition out of the preaching ministry position at Washington Street necessitated we keep it within a nine or ten-week timeframe.

Another suggestion was to increase the allotted time of each session. One hour had been chosen because it coincided with the church’s Wednesday night Bible classes.

⁷ Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*.

For those with children, this would alleviate the need to find childcare during our sessions. However, we could easily have spent an hour and a half or even two hours in each session. Arranging for childcare or making other accommodations would be well worth the effort if it would allow for more allotted time. While there are several ways to add time to the cohort, I took it as a positive sign that several expressed their desire for more.

Each session was conducted with time allotted for instruction, group practice, group discussion, and “take home” assignments. This format was very helpful as it allowed plenty of opportunities for explanation, demonstration, and group reflection. I was generally satisfied with the amount of time allotted to each component. I knew that it would be important to spend a good amount of time teaching about each discipline to fulfill my goal of having each member come to a better understanding of the disciplines. It was also important to practice the disciplines together and fulfill the goal of equipping members in the practices. Scandrette utilizes small groups to great effect and writes, “Most of us need less time in the museum or stadium and more time together in the studio or gym creating and training.” He refers to his groups as “learning labs” and envisions them as essential to building the type of community necessary for spiritual formation.⁸ I heeded his admonition to put a priority on *praxis*⁹ and tried to balance the time between teaching, practicing, and debriefing. It was vital to set aside time to create the space for debriefing and reflection on the practice and to discuss the homework assignments from each week.

⁸ Scandrette, *Practicing the Way of Jesus*, 42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

Participants were encouraged each week to take the discipline home with them and practice it on their own. Some of these “homework” assignments proved challenging. On several occasions, participants expressed frustration that they did not properly prioritize their time to practice them at home. This did not seem to affect any one particular member for the entirety of the cohort but did serve to underscore the importance of being intentional about one’s spiritual health. One participant suggested that sending a daily text as a reminder might be helpful. While I did send weekly e-mails to each participant, I realized that not all of the participants checked their e-mails often enough for this to be an effective means of encouragement between sessions.

Regular attendance was a real challenge faced by some. Even though all had agreed upon the meeting time to be every Wednesday at 7 pm, a couple of group members ran into scheduling conflicts. One participant missed two weeks consecutively due to a business trip, but eagerly caught up with the group upon return. Another participant experienced greater difficulty due to work. He missed the first session and essentially dropped out of the group after the fifth week, being unable to continue. He expressed his regret to me and apologized for not being able to see it through. I did not include him in the final assessment since he had not fully participated in the entirety of the project. A few of the other participants missed a week or two intermittently due to illness, but generally caught up on the practices upon return. These sessions were conducted in the Winter and Spring of 2022 at a time when our community was still dealing with the occasional increase in Covid-19 cases, calling for greater caution.

The Disciplines

I chose the disciplines of Bible study, meditative reading, prayer, and serving others because each was identified by Hawkins and Parkinson as key catalysts shown to move individuals from one stage of spiritual maturity to the next.¹⁰ I also believed that, while they would be familiar enough to participants, I would be able to present new approaches which would deepen participants' understanding of each. In other words, I felt there was much more we could all learn. As mentioned above, there are many disciplines we could have chosen. Gunnells chose the disciplines of solitude, hospitality, contemplative Bible reading, and prayer because these were practices Jesus engaged in during his ministry.¹¹ With the desire expressed by some participants to continue meeting, I can envision a follow-up to this initial cohort experience that might include solitude and hospitality as well as others.

The Assessment Tools

The development of the assessment tools was a significant challenge to this project. I was mindful of Nouwen's cautionary statement in *Reaching Out*, "[...] it is of great importance that we leave the world of measurements behind when we speak about the life of the Spirit."¹² Ortberg's comment, however, cited in chapter one, conveys the importance of this daunting task. "There is only one thing I can think of more foolish than trying to gauge spiritual growth. And that is: not trying to gauge it."¹³

¹⁰ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 123.

¹¹ Gunnells, "Forming Leaders Through Spiritual Disciplines," 15.

¹² Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, 17.

¹³ Hawkins et al., *Follow Me*, 3.

I had consulted with other researchers who had attempted to measure spiritual growth in similar projects.¹⁴ Cally Parkinson did not recommend using the tool developed from their research, as it was not designed to be used within the limited time frame of my project design.¹⁵ Travis Sharpe suggested I consider Lynn Underwood’s “Sixteen Little Questions” as a quantitative assessment tool, as he had.¹⁶ After consideration, however, I felt it did not adequately address the specific goals I had set for my project. I decided then, following Tim Gunnells, to develop my own.¹⁷ I did follow a format similar to Underwood’s for the design of my own Spiritual Formation Survey.¹⁸ I wanted to know which of the disciplines would be most impactful on the participants and might lead to greater spiritual growth. I also wanted to measure what, if any, spiritual growth might have taken place at the end of the cohort. In retrospect, I could have used Underwood’s as an additional assessment tool and compared the results against those of my own survey.

I first considered the three goals of the project to compose this assessment: (1) to enhance participants’ understanding of spiritual formation; (2) to equip participants in specific spiritual disciplines; (3) to facilitate spiritual growth. From these goals, I decided

¹⁴ These recommendations were given through e-mail and Zoom conversations I initiated during the design phase of the project with Drs. Parkinson, Sharpe, and Gunnells. Each was very gracious in these conversations and helpful in their suggestions.

¹⁵ These assessments were developed based on the Reveal/Move research I had used to determine the disciplines for my project. “REVEAL Assessments,” *REVEAL Assessments*, accessed October 26, 2022, <https://revealforchurch.com>.

¹⁶ Sharpe, “Discipleship Programs and Spiritual Formation: Does a Discipleship Program at Grace Bridge Church Combining a Missional/Narrative Hermeneutic with Spiritual Disciplines Lead to a Noticeable Change in Love of God and Others?”; Lynn G. Underwood, *Spiritual Connection in Daily Life: Sixteen Little Questions That Can Make a Big Difference* (West Conshohocken, Pennsylvania: Templeton Press, 2013), 33-88.

¹⁷ Gunnells, “Forming Leaders Through Spiritual Disciplines.”

¹⁸ Appendix B.

to look at five categories related to each discipline: (1) understanding of; (2) valuing of; (3) practice of; (4) satisfaction with; and (5) general feeling of closeness to God. I then developed five specific questions and applied them to each of the four disciplines to create my survey. I asked participants to evaluate the following statements for each of the four disciplines (Bible study, meditative reading, prayer, serving) using a simple Likert scale.

1. I think I have a good understanding of _____ as it relates to my spiritual journey.
2. I value the discipline of _____ as important to my spiritual journey.
3. I practice the discipline of _____ regularly to grow in my relationship with God.
4. I feel satisfied with my current practice of _____.
5. I feel closer to God because of my practice of _____.

This resulted in a list of twenty questions. I field tested the questionnaire with the elders of the congregation and asked for their feedback. They each provided some helpful suggestions. Following their suggestions, I clarified a couple of the questions and decided to add five questions to assess spiritual formation in general.

1. I think I have a good understanding of spiritual formation.
2. I feel like I know what I can do to grow in my spiritual life.
3. I have people who encourage me in my spiritual life.
4. I feel as if I am growing in my relationship with God and greater Christ-likeness.
5. I want to grow in my relationship with God and greater Christ-likeness.

Participants completed this survey before the first session and again, immediately following the final session. There are several inherent challenges to this approach. One, it is imperative that each participant have the time and space to thoughtfully complete it in full. Since we spent the last session in reflection and discussion over the entire project, I did not allow adequate time for each participant to complete the assessment. Instead, I gave it to them at the end of the final session and asked them to return it as soon as

possible. Most returned it promptly, but I had to follow up with some a few weeks later. One never returned the assessment; therefore, I removed that participant's pre-cohort assessment from the analysis. This could produce skewed results. I would allow time for members to complete it before we disband the group, if I were to do it again. As an alternative, perhaps I would add one additional session at the end simply to collect the assessments.

Another challenge was found simply in the nature of communication. One participant asked me to clarify more than one statement. I realized that the wording of the statements could have been vague or confusing. Perhaps this assessment might provide better results if I had clarified each statement with everyone within the session. Also, I wished that I had formulated the final five questions related to spiritual growth in general to more fully correlate with the same five questions asked of each discipline. As it is, the final set of five questions assesses statements quite different from the ones asked of the specific disciplines. I believe it could benefit from more field testing before being used again as an assessment of spiritual growth.

For the development of the second assessment tool, the Cohort Feedback Questionnaire, I compiled six open-ended questions designed to provide constructive feedback from the participants to improve the cohort in future iterations.¹⁹ These were:

1. How has your view of God changed through the process of this cohort experience?
2. How has your view of yourself changed through this process?
3. Describe any "aha moments" you may have had through this process. Any turning points or moments of insight?
4. Which of the disciplines we discussed did you find most helpful? Why?
5. How would you describe your relationship with God right now?
6. What suggestions do you have that might improve this cohort experience for future groups?

¹⁹ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 17.

Finally, I obtained an empty notebook to keep with me throughout each session of the cohort experience for field notes. In each session, thoughts, insights, personal observations, and comments made by group members were recorded to be evaluated later. These notes also served helpful in reminding me, as the group leader, of past discussions to revisit in later sessions.

Evaluating the Quantitative Data

What did the assessments reveal? The following table provides an overview of the quantitative results from the Spiritual Formation Survey.

Table 4.2 Cohort Evaluation Questionnaire Results (Questions 1-20)

Question:	Pre	Post	Change
<i>1 I have a good understanding of prayer.</i>	4.20	4.60	0.50
<i>2 I value the discipline of prayer.</i>	4.70	5.00	0.30
<i>3 I practice prayer regularly.</i>	4.10	4.60	0.50
<i>4 I feel satisfied with my current practice of prayer.</i>	2.20	3.20	1.00
<i>5 I feel closer to God because of my practice of prayer.</i>	4.30	4.80	0.50
<i>6 I have a good understanding of Bible Study.</i>	4.05	4.50	0.45
<i>7 I value the discipline of Bible Study.</i>	4.50	4.90	0.40
<i>8 I regularly engage in Bible Study.</i>	3.50	4.10	0.60
<i>9 I feel satisfied with my current practice of Bible Study.</i>	2.40	3.40	1.00
<i>10 I feel closer to God because of my practice of Bible Study.</i>	4.00	4.70	0.70
<i>11 I have a good understanding of serving others.</i>	4.30	4.70	0.40
<i>12 I value the discipline of serving others.</i>	4.80	4.80	0.00
<i>13 I regularly engage in serving others.</i>	3.60	4.40	0.80
<i>14 I feel satisfied with my current practice of serving others.</i>	2.30	3.60	1.30
<i>15 I feel closer to God because of my practice of serving.</i>	4.40	4.70	0.30
<i>16 I have a good understanding of meditative Bible reading.</i>	2.55	4.40	1.85
<i>17 I value the discipline of meditative Bible reading.</i>	3.50	4.50	1.00
<i>18 I regularly engage in the practice of meditative reading.</i>	1.90	3.50	1.60
<i>19 I feel satisfied with my current practice of meditative reading.</i>	1.90	3.40	1.50
<i>20 I feel closer to God because of my practice of meditative reading.</i>	2.60	4.40	1.80
		Avg. Change	0.76

The figures in this table represent the pre- and post-averages per question, as well as the degree of difference between the two, for the first twenty questions. Questions 1-20 assess the disciplines themselves. Eight questions showed a positive increase of +1.0 or more. Eight showed a positive increase of +.50 or less. Notably, no questions indicated a decrease. A paired sample t-test was performed to compare the data between the pre-assessment and post-assessment. There was significant difference between the pre-assessment and post-assessment: $t(19) = -6.774$, $p = 0.000002$.

Since each of the four disciplines (prayer, Bible study, serving others, meditative reading) was addressed by five questions, I looked at the average of each set of five questions, to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the group relative to each discipline.

Table 4.3 Average of Each Discipline

Discipline	Pre-Average	Post-Average	Change
Prayer (questions 1-5)	3.90	4.46	+0.56
Bible Study (questions 6-10)	3.69	4.32	+0.63
Serving Others (questions 11-15)	3.88	4.44	+0.56
Meditative Reading (questions 16-20)	2.49	4.04	+1.55

Notably, prayer had the highest average before the cohort (3.90), but that was closely followed by serving others (3.88). Both the disciplines of prayer and serving others remained the highest averages at the conclusion (4.46 and 4.44, respectively). I was pleased that none of the disciplines saw a decrease. Most significantly, the discipline which showed the most change was meditative reading (+1.55) and was, in fact, the only discipline to show a change greater than +1.0. A t-test run on these two arrays of data (pre-average and post-average) indicated this was a significant change as well.

The results between men and women were very similar and can be seen by comparing the following two tables.

Table 4.4 Average of Each Discipline by Gender (Men)

Discipline	Pre-Average	Post-Average	Change
Prayer (questions 1-5)	3.72	4.45	+0.73
Bible Study (questions 6-10)	3.44	4.10	+0.66
Serving Others (questions 11-15)	3.56	4.35	+0.79
Meditative Reading (questions 16-20)	2.80	4.20	+1.40

Table 4.5 Average of Each Discipline by Gender (Women)

Discipline	Pre-Average	Post-Average	Change
Prayer (questions 1-5)	3.91	4.47	+0.55
Bible Study (questions 6-10)	3.64	4.47	+0.82
Serving Others (questions 11-15)	3.91	4.50	+0.59
Meditative Reading (questions 16-20)	2.33	3.93	+1.60

Prayer was the greatest strength for men prior to the cohort (3.72). It was a strength for women as well but tied with serving others as their greatest strength prior to the cohort (3.91). Prayer remained the greatest strength for men after the cohort (4.45) while Bible study tied with prayer as the greatest strength for women after the cohort (4.47). Men saw the greatest degree of change in meditative reading (+1.4) and serving others (+0.79). Women saw the greatest degree of change in meditative reading (+1.6) and Bible study (+0.82).

In analyzing the data further, I looked at the five questions regarding each discipline: (1) Had there been any growth in understanding of each discipline? (2) Had there been any growth in the valuing of each discipline? (3) Had there been any growth in the practice of each discipline? (4) Had there been any growth in participants' satisfaction with their practice of the discipline? (5) Had there been any growth in overall closeness with God as a result of each discipline? The results were telling.

1) *Had there been growth in understanding of each discipline?*

Table 4.6 Changes in Understanding

Understanding of...	Change
Prayer	+0.50
Bible Study	+0.45
Serving Others	+0.40
Meditative Reading	+1.85

Participants experienced a minimal increase in their understanding of prayer, Bible study, and serving, however, they experienced the greatest growth in their understanding of meditative reading. Participants grew in their understanding of meditative reading by an average of +1.85. This was the only discipline to see a growth of more than +1.0 in understanding. It was apparent that this was the discipline least familiar to the participants before the cohort. The discipline which saw the least degree of growth in understanding was serving others (+0.40). Serving Others, however, had ranked very high before the cohort and remained high at the end showing minimal change. I found it interesting that Bible study showed one of the lowest degrees of increase as well. This is perhaps due to the emphasis on Bible study in our fellowship of churches of Christ. We have traditionally been known as a “people of the book” and prided ourselves in our knowledge of the Bible. In my experience, we have typically preferred an academic or informational approach to the Bible rather than a prayerful or meditative one. It pleased me that most of the participants seemed to come away from the experience with a greater understanding of meditative reading.

2) *Had participants experienced growth in the way they valued each discipline?*

Table 4.7 Changes in Valuing

Valuing of...	Change
Prayer	+0.3
Bible Study	+0.4
Serving Others	+0.0
Meditative Reading	+1.0

The disciplines of prayer, Bible study and meditative reading showed an increase in participants' valuing of them, but the greatest increase was, again, for meditative reading (+1.0). This could be because meditative reading was the least understood at the outset of the program and had been among the least valued. The discipline of serving showed zero amount of growth (+0.0). I was pleased to see that participants continued to highly value the practice of serving while increasing their estimation of meditative reading, Bible study, and prayer.

3) *Had participants grown in their participation of each discipline?*

Table 4.8 Changes in Participation

Participation of...	Change
Prayer	+0.5
Bible Study	+0.6
Serving Others	+0.8
Meditative Reading	+1.6

Once again, the discipline which saw the most positive growth in practice was the discipline of meditative reading. Participants grew in their practice of meditative reading an average of +1.6, again the only practice to see growth over +1.0. The discipline of serving saw a growth of +0.8. The discipline which saw the least amount of growth in participation was, interestingly enough, prayer (+0.5). This was somewhat surprising based on personal observation. Several members had expressed frustration with their personal prayer times throughout the group sessions and I would have expected there to

be greater growth in this area. It could indicate that members felt just as frustrated with their prayer life after as before or an indicator that they believed there was still great room for improvement.

4) Had participants' level of satisfaction in their practice of each discipline grown?

Table 4.9 Changes in Satisfaction Level

Satisfaction with the practice of...	Change
Prayer	+1.00
Bible Study	+1.00
Serving Others	+1.30
Meditative Reading	+1.50

It should be noted that the questions regarding participants' level of satisfaction in their practice of each discipline were the lowest ratings of any of the questions prior to the cohort: prayer (2.20); Bible study (2.40); serving (2.30); meditative reading (1.90). While not the highest numbers after the cohort, participants indicated an increase of +1.0 or higher in each discipline. It seems clear that participants felt they had grown in their level of satisfaction in each of the four practices.

Again, the discipline that saw the greatest amount of positive increase was meditative reading. Participants reported a greater level of satisfaction in meditative reading by an increase of +1.5. The discipline of serving also showed a very close degree of growth in satisfaction (+1.30). Though we only emphasized serving during one cohort session, it seems that participants grew in their level of satisfaction beyond what I would have expected. The disciplines which saw the least degree of growth were prayer (+1.0) and Bible study (+1.0). The results, however, are encouraging indeed! Participants reported an increased satisfaction level in every one of the four disciplines by +1.0 or more.

(5) *Had there been growth in overall closeness with God as a result of each discipline?*

Table 4.10 Changes in Closeness with God

Closeness with God as a result of...	Change
Prayer	+0.5
Bible Study	+0.7
Serving Others	+0.3
Meditative Reading	+1.8

The most important thing I wanted to know was if the practice of these disciplines would bring any of the participants closer in relationship with God. Again, the discipline of meditative reading showed the greatest increase (+1.8). Participants reported a significant increase in their feelings that meditative reading was bringing them closer to God. The discipline of serving showed the least increase (+0.3).

It is difficult to draw solid conclusions based on a survey such as this. Overall, I was pleased with the degree of growth observed in each category related to the disciplines. Participants grew by an average of +0.76 overall. Only one participant reported a decrease. I did expect to see more participants report a decrease in some areas. Often, the more one becomes aware of a discipline, the more apt they are to give lower marks. This was not the case.

I was also pleased to see that participants' level of satisfaction with their practice of each discipline also increased. In fact, this increase was, on average, more than in the other areas (understanding, valuing, practice, and closeness with God). It is hard to dismiss, also, the degree to which meditative reading stands out in this survey.

Participants reported the most growth in every area as it related to meditative reading. They grew in their understanding of meditative reading by +1.85. They grew in their valuing of meditative reading by +1.0, in their practice of meditative reading by +1.6, in their satisfaction with the practice by +1.5, and in their feeling of closeness to God as a

result of it by +1.8. I was pleased to see that meditative reading was the greatest area of growth.

This correlated with Gunnell's findings as well. In his project focusing on solitude, hospitality, contemplative Bible reading, and prayer, it was contemplative Bible reading which demonstrated the biggest increase.²⁰ Though Gunnells does not speculate further on why this may be the case, I believe this reflects one of the strongest, historical strengths of the churches of Christ. Gunnell's project took a very similar approach and was conducted in a very similar context with a small-town church of Christ in southern Tennessee. Churches of Christ have been known as a "people of the book" for our emphasis on Scripture both in corporate worship and for personal study. For that reason, I suspected that participants in the cohort would gravitate naturally to the Bible-centric disciplines. We have not generally been known, however, for meditative practices. A more academic approach is generally favored. The practice of *lectio divina* presented participants with a new way of engaging an old practice, reading their Bibles. For that reason, I believe, the group found it enriching.

The disciplines of serving and prayer, however, still received the strongest evaluation overall at the end of the cohort (4.44 each). The participants felt the strongest about these disciplines and represent the group's overall strengths. Going forward, it would be interesting to repeat the program using a different group, or perhaps different groups organized based on age, and compare these results. If these results would be compared against a group from a different faith background or tradition, would there be a difference?

²⁰ Gunnells, "Forming Leaders Through Spiritual Disciplines," 119.

The final set of five questions addressed spiritual formation in general.

Table 4.11 Cohort Evaluation Questionnaire <i>Spiritual Formation Questions (21-25)</i>	Pre	Post	Change
<i>21 I have a good understanding of spiritual formation.</i>	3.85	4.50	0.65
<i>22 I feel like I know what I can do to grow in my spiritual life.</i>	3.90	4.60	0.70
<i>23 I have people who encourage me in my spiritual life.</i>	4.25	4.70	0.45
<i>24 I feel as if I am growing in my relationship with God and greater Christ-likeness.</i>	3.90	4.50	0.60
<i>25 I want to grow in my relationship with God and greater Christ-likeness.</i>	5.00	5.00	0.00

The statement which saw the highest degree of agreement both before and after the cohort was # 25 “I want to grow in my relationship with God and greater Christ-likeness.” This was not surprising. The desire to grow was what prompted most of the members to agree to participate in the beginning. It was reassuring to see that all the participants felt strongly about their desire to grow and indicates a real strength of the group.

The statement which saw the least degree of agreement related to spiritual formation in general before the program was # 21 “I have a good understanding of spiritual formation.” Participants, however, grew in this somewhat significantly by +0.65 by the post-evaluation. The greatest degree of growth, however, was in question # 22, “I feel like I know what I can do to grow in my spiritual life” (+0.7). I was pleased to see this, as a primary goal was to equip members with practices that they could do on their own to grow further. T-tests run on this data indicate a high degree of confidence that the results are not random.

Evaluating the Qualitative Feedback

After reviewing the data from the quantitative survey, I turned to the comments given through the cohort questionnaire. I read each of the questionnaire forms looking for

common themes or key insights. I established a simple system of coding to help me look for repeated patterns related to the disciplines: (P) prayer; (ST) Bible study; (SO) serving others; (MR) meditative reading; (SF) spiritual formation in general; (FB) feedback on structure; (R) emphasis on relationship with God; (I) special insights or “aha” comments. These categories arose from my reading of the comments. I also consulted my field notes looking for any personal observations I had recorded to remind me of the discussion from each session. In analyzing my notes and the comments from the feedback questionnaire, the following themes emerged.

1) Participants generally embraced several “new” ways to practice “old” disciplines.

Since one of my goals was to equip members with spiritual practices, I endeavored to introduce new ways to practice familiar disciplines. My thought was that a fresh approach for both prayer and reading Scripture would be an encouragement to participants and motivate them to practice it more effectively. I believe I was right. Prayer had been identified as a key catalyst of spiritual growth by the Hawkins and Parkinson research, but their research had not elaborated on specific types of prayer. Therefore, I introduced the cohort to both breath prayer and the prayer of self examen. Participants responded positively to these practices, and reported that, while new and unfamiliar, they were very beneficial. Regarding the daily examen, one participant wrote, “The daily reflection was eye-opening to how God works in my life all day long and to recognize things that happened I could improve on.” Another wrote, “The daily examen helped me to think about my day from a heavenly perspective, which changed what I considered valuable.” One member confessed, “This is not something I regularly do, and it really made me realize some problematic thoughts and attitudes.”

The breath prayer exercise was similarly impactful. One member told me that it was her “favorite new practice.” She wrote, “I have practiced [breath prayer] a lot! I use it to remind myself of some truth God has shown me that day in my study, or sometimes to remind myself of something I already know.” Another member had gone through a series of stressful events during the nine weeks, and she was very enthusiastic about breath prayer. She said, “I always knew using breathing practices was good for relaxation but adding prayer to that through Scripture has taken that to a higher spiritual level.” She indicated it has become her favorite new practice as it had helped her through several challenging situations experienced during the time of the cohort.

As corroborated by the qualitative analysis, the most impactful discipline, however, was meditative reading. It was specifically mentioned five times by participants. Many of the participants acknowledged that while somewhat familiar with the practice, they had not regularly practiced it. Several members, though, commented that they became much more comfortable with it because of the cohort. One member wrote, “Meditative Bible reading was the one I knew I enjoyed before starting this cohort but was not well-disciplined in practicing often. I found this discipline helpful because it forced me to slow down, take time, and deeply focus on my relationship with God and the Scripture.” Another member commented, “I found meditative reading to be most helpful to me. Now, when I read my Bible, I pick out certain portions to focus on for deeper meaning and application.” One participant was proud to have stepped outside her comfort zone in practicing both meditative reading and examen. “I tried something I don’t often do,” she said.

2) *Participants' view of God was not so much changed as their awareness of God enhanced.*

Most of the participants responded that their overall view of God had not changed through the cohort, nonetheless, they felt an increased awareness of him and a desire to connect with him. One member echoed that sentiment and suggested, "The intentional focus on the various tools associated with spiritual formation served to continually guide my thoughts back to God throughout each day. These reminders are invaluable." Indeed, participants came away with a renewed sense of their relationship with God. "God wants a relationship with me," wrote one participant. "I have not always believed that it was fully attainable to me." Another member wrote, "Honestly, I don't think my view of God changed that drastically, but this cohort really emphasized the relational aspect of God's character and showed me ways that I can connect with God." One participant expressed thanksgiving for the new tools she had been given, "I don't know that my view of God has changed as much as I feel like I have some new tools for deepening my relationship with him, my reliance upon him." Another wrote, "My view about how to become closer to God in my daily walk has improved."

These thoughts echo an assumption I had at the beginning of this project that spiritual formation was not, primarily, a cognitive exercise. Often our churches focus on Bible study and informationally-driven sermons whose primary purpose is to inform rather than transform. While it is a given that knowledge is vital, the feedback I received from this project was overwhelmingly appreciative of the relational approach it took. Spiritual growth is about growing in relationship with God, not simply growing in knowledge of God. That is an important insight churches need to hear.

3) *Participants left the cohort wanting more.*

As mentioned earlier, suggestions were given by several members as to how to extend the length or duration of the cohort. “I think a full quarter of lessons would be good. It would give a chance to be exposed to and practice some other disciplines that are new to most,” one member wrote. Another commented that additional sessions “would allow for a more in-depth look at the disciplines” and that it would encourage participants to “feel more comfortable to share with others and build a closer relationship to each other and God.” A few suggested longer sessions. “I would suggest a little bit longer class periods, so you can talk and fellowship as well as put some into more practice during the session.” This member expressed appreciation for the relationships which had been enriched because of the cohort and was not ready to disband after the final session.

These comments and others underscored the important role that community (*koinonia*) played throughout the cohort. I had known community would be important, but it was named by several members as a key reason they wanted to continue. Churches need to pay attention to this fundamental human need in their thinking about programs, classes, and small groups. The intentional building of spiritual relationships within a church is vitally important to spiritual formation.

4) *The most challenging obstacle to spiritual growth was the prioritization of time to practice the disciplines individually.*

As already mentioned, one member suggested I send a daily text reminder to all of the participants reminding them of their “at home” assignments. This evidenced the difficulty some had in keeping up with the practice of the disciplines at home. This member identified a “propensity towards distraction” as a particular challenge for him.

Other members confessed that they did not adequately practice the disciplines on their own often enough because of “a busy week.” This occurred periodically throughout the nine weeks. This difficulty did not seem to center on one discipline, but rather seemed to be the result of scheduling conflicts that arose during the nine weeks. This “busyness” of members’ daily lives is a difficult obstacle to overcome but seemed common to most in the group. It is the responsibility of every individual to prioritize one’s own spiritual growth and to be intentional about it. While the pressures of the community can be a positive motivating factor, it was not always enough to assure that every member practiced every discipline every day.

Summary of Results

The results of the assessment indicate that the program was successful at meeting its three overall goals: (1) to educate participants in the process of spiritual formation; (2) to equip participants with spiritually-formative practices; and (3) to facilitate spiritual growth in the participants.

First, participants were educated in the process of spiritual formation. The qualitative data indicates that each participant grew in their understanding of the disciplines as well as in spiritual formation in general. Participants showed an increase in their understanding of spiritual formation in general (+0.65). The practice of meditative reading showed the greatest increase in growth (+1.85); but it is noteworthy that there was growth in every discipline (prayer, Bible study, meditative reading, and serving). The discipline of serving others showed the least amount of growth in understanding (+0.40); nonetheless it tied with prayer as having the highest degree of understanding (4.70). This growth in knowledge and understanding was mentioned as being very meaningful by

several participants. “I feel like I have a better understanding of how to study Scripture and to have a close relationship to God,” one wrote on the feedback questionnaire.

Interestingly, several participants responded that they had learned the most about *themselves*. One described an “aha” moment experienced through the course of one of the sessions. “For me it was an ‘aha’ moment to realize different people were gifted at different disciplines. I always tended to beat myself up over these disciplines that I had to work more on or that didn’t come naturally.” The participant went on to describe her self-realization that she is naturally drawn to other disciplines that are very impactful as well. She also expressed that the experience, “solidified things I know about myself as well as showed me areas I can improve.” Self-discovery, it seems, was an important serendipity of the experience.

Second, participants were equipped with spiritually-formative practices, some familiar, and some new. It was important, for the long-term success of the program, that participants leave with a sense of knowing what they could do on their own to continue down the path of spiritual growth once the program had completed. It seems this was accomplished. Participants indicated that they grew in their knowledge of what they can do to grow spiritually by +0.70, the greatest degree of increase seen in the questions asked about spiritual formation in general.²¹

Participants also reported an overall increase in confidence knowing they now have tools to help them grow. “This cohort has given me new practices that I believe will help me grow spiritually and seek a closer relationship with God,” one participant responded. Another wrote, “I feel more confident in using a variety of practices in my

²¹ See Appendix B. Questions 21-25 of the Spiritual Formation Survey pertained to spiritual formation in general. Question 22 posed, “I feel like I know what I can do to grow in my spiritual life.”

daily walk with God to increase my spiritual growth.” Indeed, the introduction of new ways to practice familiar disciplines was named by several as particularly helpful. “The prayer of self examen was special for me,” one wrote. “This is not something I regularly do, and it really made me realize some problematic thoughts and attitudes.”

Finally, participants grew spiritually through the process. Positive movement, albeit small, was seen in every category (understanding, valuing, practicing, satisfaction, closeness with God) for each of the four disciplines. All but one of the participants showed an increase in their spiritual formation average.²² The overall increase was only +0.76, but personal comments indicate greater success. One participant responded, “I feel a closer relationship with God and feel his presence in my life.” Another, “I feel my relationship to God is strong and continuing to grow.” Participants indicated that they enjoyed the time spent in the cohort; and felt like they had grown through the spiritual exercises and group discussion. The comments from the qualitative questionnaire provide helpful feedback on the program’s blessing to the participants. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and the suggestions were all constructive in nature. Notes from my field journal as well as personal observation of the group discussion corroborate this conclusion.

Conclusion

The data from both the quantitative survey and the qualitative questionnaire reveal an overall picture of spiritual benefit from the group experience and indicate the program was successful in meeting its overall goals. Confidence in this assessment, however, should be held with a degree of humility. The study would benefit from

²² The spiritual formation average was the average of all the participant’s answers given on the Spiritual Assessment Survey (Appendix B), questions 1-25.

repeated implementations and additional participants. In chapter five I will look back on the theological framework; and then I will look ahead to provide some reflections for future iterations of the program, should I have opportunity to implement it again.

Chapter Five

CONCLUSION: REFLECTING BACK AND LOOKING AHEAD

The purpose of this project was to develop a program to facilitate spiritual growth among members of the Washington Street Church of Christ. This program utilized a small group format with participants engaging in spiritually formative practices together over the course of nine weeks. The specific practices of Bible study, meditative reading, prayer, and serving together were selected because these were identified by Hawkins and Parkinson as “key catalysts” for spiritual growth. These practices had been shown to help disciples “move” from one level of spiritual maturity to the next.¹ I chose these specific disciplines because they were among the top five catalysts identified by the research and were disciplines which I felt would be well received by members of the congregation. These are also disciplines that are at the very heart of God. The practices of prayer, Bible study, and meditating on Scripture are primary ways we communicate with God and grow in our relationship with him. The discipline of serving others models precisely what Jesus did and taught his disciples to do.

The small group met together weekly over the course of nine weeks during the congregation’s traditional Wednesday evening Bible class hour (7 pm). Each session included time for teaching, group practice of the selected discipline, and a time of discussion. Participants were also tasked with “take-home” assignments to practice at home throughout the week and part of the discussion when we gathered.

I outlined three goals for this project: (1) for participants to come away with a greater understanding of the process of spiritual formation; (2) for participants to be

¹ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 123.

equipped with spiritually formative practices they could continue to practice on their own once the project was completed; and (3) to facilitate spiritual growth in each participant. Participants were asked to complete a spiritual formation survey both before and after the cohort so that the quantitative results could be compared.² I wanted to assess if any growth took place during the process. Qualitative data was also obtained by asking each participant to complete a Cohort Feedback Questionnaire³ at the end of the program. These were considered, along with my field notes and personal observations, to measure if any spiritual growth took place as a result of the program.

Results from the quantitative survey showed that participants grew in their understanding of, their valuing of, their participation of, their level of satisfaction with, and their overall closeness to God through each discipline (prayer, Bible study, meditative reading, and serving others). The qualitative questionnaire indicated that participants generally embraced new ways of practicing old disciplines, came away with a greater “awareness” of God, were challenged to make spiritual formation a higher priority in their lives, and ended the cohort desiring for it to continue. By these indicators, it was determined that the project met its goals of educating, equipping, and increasing the spiritual maturity of participants.

Reflection

I began this project by personally wrestling with the notion of spiritual formation. It seemed like a vague and confusing subject. I sought to learn from many different authors’ perspectives in order to settle upon a definition that was both biblical and clear,

² Appendix B.

³ Appendix C.

while also being robust enough to adequately describe the process. Most authors' definitions shared many common elements. I found Wilhoit's definition, with a slight addendum by Zscheille, to be particularly helpful for the sake of this project.

Spiritual formation is the intentional, communal process of growing in our relationship with God and being conformed to Christ through the power of the Spirit for the sake of the world.⁴

The six important elements of this definition which were instructive to the development of this program were: (1) spiritual formation is a process; (2) spiritual formation is a communal process; (3) spiritual formation is a process directed by the Holy Spirit; (4) the goal of spiritual formation is to grow in Christ-likeness; (5) spiritual formation is not an end unto itself, but is intended for the sake of others; and (6) spiritual formation is an intentional process. Each of these elements was important in the design and implementation of this project.

As mentioned in chapter one, it is a daunting task to seek to measure spiritual maturity, much less facilitate spiritual growth. However, churches must make intentional efforts to do so. Simply putting forth programs and encouraging participation does not automatically create spiritually mature disciples of Jesus. Greater effort must be made on the part of churches to intentionally form disciples. Here I offer the following observations as I consider how my experience through this project affected my working definition of spiritual formation.

Programs such as this can teach, encourage, and create a conducive environment, but spiritual growth is a life-long process. There is an inherent limitation to

⁴ Zscheille added, "for the sake of the world" to emphasize the missional nature of spiritual formation. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as If the Church Mattered*, 23; Zscheille, "A Missional Theology of Spiritual Formation," 7.

a project such as this. Nine weeks does not seem like an adequate time frame to see significant change in spiritual maturity occur. Indeed, the quantitative data, while indicating a slight growth between pre- and post-assessments, is not strong enough to draw clear conclusions. Clearer, perhaps, is the feedback received from many of the participants desiring more time and more sessions. This was expressed by many and could indicate a feeling of making progress and growth, and also a feeling that they still had not arrived at where they wanted to be spiritually. There are simply limits to what programs, even strongly relational programs, can facilitate.

Community (koinonia) is essential to the process of spiritual growth, but small groups may not be the ideal environment for cultivating it. Several participants expressed thankfulness for the encouragement they received from other members of the group throughout the cohort. The participatory nature of a small group, as opposed to the lecture-style format most commonly experienced in our traditional Bible classes, was described by several participants as very encouraging. Small groups, with all of their strengths, also have their weaknesses. While I believe the context did provide an environment conducive to growth, there are perhaps better formats to accomplish this. As already mentioned, Ogden makes a case for micro-groups, or “triads,” as a more effective environment than small groups. Smaller groups of three or even four can provide the much-needed communal element (*koinonia*) essential to spiritual growth but would also provide a greater degree of intimacy. In fact, a small group of ten to twelve might be too large for a truly rich environment to be cultivated.⁵ This project included twelve participants who were already well-acquainted with one another and there was a high

⁵ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 144.

level of comfort with one another. Still, there were occasions during some sessions when I did not feel like everyone had fully participated. Questions may have been left unanswered or comments unsaid. The group discussions were relatively surface-level. True community would be even harder to develop for groups of individuals who are unacquainted with each other.

Spiritual growth is an intentional process, but it cannot be manufactured. It must be recognized that spiritual growth is not, primarily, something one produces by one's own effort. It is the work of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit of God is not something that can be manipulated or coerced by human means. Spiritual growth is an inward reality as the Spirit works on the heart of the individual to become more Christ-like. It is possible to practice the disciplines without opening oneself to the Spirit and becoming more like Jesus. This ought to bring humility to any effort designed to produce such results.

The goal of the Christian life is to become increasingly like Jesus. It is important what churches measure as "success." Churches tend to measure attendance, contribution, and conversions. Individuals often tend to measure things like how many times they read their Bible in a week, attend church services, or pray. They might even consider their offering in this as well. While those things are all certainly important, the most important thing is whether or not people are becoming more like Jesus. Becoming like Christ was emphasized at the outset of this program, but the assessment tools were not really designed with that in mind. Greater attention should have been given to this.

As in Wilhoit's definition, the key element often missing in spiritual formation theology is the concept that we are being formed into the image of Christ for a purpose, and that purpose is not just for ourselves. We are formed "for the sake of the world."

This gives a missional purpose to our theology of formation. This missional purpose was evidenced by the growth indicated by the practice of serving others. Participants rated serving others as among the highest of their practices both prior to and after the cohort. Participants grew in their practice of serving by +0.8, second only to meditative reading. Participants realized that the selfless act of serving others not only facilitates growth but is the very reason for which we are being formed.

Finally, though primarily the work of the Spirit, spiritual growth does not happen without some intentional effort on the part of the disciple. The spiritual disciplines of Bible study, meditative reading, prayer, and serving others were found to be ideal and effective practices that opened participants to the Spirit and facilitated the Spirit's work in their life. Perhaps the lack of spiritual maturity being observed in churches today is not for a lack of the Spirit, but a lack of effort on the part of believers. Churches too often create a spectator mentality among its members by asking too little of them, except for attendance and participation in a variety of activities. In this project, I observed, some participants gave greater effort than others. The same is true in our churches. Individual schedules, jobs, and family responsibilities all vie for our attention and affect the degree of effort people give to their own spiritual growth.

I also observed that not every practice is for everyone. Feedback received from this project indicated that participants naturally gravitated toward some practices over others. The practice of meditative reading saw the greatest degree of growth in every category but was not everyone's favorite. Some confessed to struggling with it, as well as with the practice of the daily examen as a way to pray. Here is where the richness of

Christian tradition can offer modern disciples an array of various disciplines to draw from as they consider their own rule of life.

Overall, I was very pleased with the outcome of the cohort experience. The cohort met the project's goals. One, participants came away with a greater understanding of the process of spiritual formation. Two, members were equipped with spiritually formative practices which they can continue to practice on their own. Three, every participant showed slight growth in spiritual maturity. The quantitative survey indicated that there was growth by every member in the categories of understanding, valuing, practicing, satisfaction, and overall relationship with God. In addition, every participant indicated a positive feeling about the experience, and several expressed a desire for it to continue.

Future Considerations

Members of the group provided helpful insight into how the cohort experience might be improved for future iterations of the project. Their suggestions and observations will be invaluable in further developing the program. Lessons were learned through the course of the project that will also be beneficial to future endeavors. If I were to implement this project again at Washington Street or another congregation, I would lengthen the cohort from nine weeks to at least twelve, perhaps even up to twenty-four weeks. That would provide more time for members to build community, strengthen relationships, explore the disciplines, and practice together. I would add to the practices and look for additional catalysts for growth to incorporate into the curriculum. As already mentioned, the history of Christian tradition is full of practices that could be incorporated

into the program. Adele Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* contains a rich repository of many of these practices.⁶

I would also like to tailor the curriculum to different age groups, particularly youth groups. I wonder how young people would respond to the disciplines of spiritual formation and if the outcome would be any different from groups of older Christians. A program designed specifically for church leaders might be beneficial as well. If given the opportunity, I would experiment with different size groups as well. While I was pleased with our group experience, I want to know if a small, "micro-group" might be even more conducive to spiritual growth. I am intrigued by Ogden's case for smaller groups.⁷ This project could be helped by repeating the process utilizing various size groups and comparing the results.

I regret the timing of my departure as the congregation's preaching minister. My aim had been to incorporate it into the church's education cycle at least once a year. With my leaving, this is uncertain. I will share these observations and conclusions with the leadership and, perhaps, they can be of benefit to the congregation. I am confident that this project will continue to bear fruit in the lives of those who participated, including myself.

Acknowledgments and Final Thoughts

Finally, I wish to express thanks to my wife, Celeste, and my four sons, Andy, David, Michael, and Daniel, who allowed me to follow this "wild hair" of mid-life and start out on a doctoral program with HST three years ago. It has been extremely

⁶ Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*.

⁷ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 144.

rewarding, both professionally, personally, and especially, spiritually. I will forever be indebted to their patience and encouragement. I am also most grateful to the congregation at Washington Street and its leadership who enabled me to undertake this endeavor and kept me encouraged along the way, even in the midst of a world-wide pandemic. My hope is that these efforts will benefit the congregation spiritually and will continue to bear fruit not only in the lives of those who participated, but also in all those to whom they minister for many years to come. This experience has been extremely impactful for me. The planning, researching, and conducting of this project has been spiritually formative in more ways than I can describe. I look forward to continuing to develop these ideas and refining this program for future iterations.

“... until Christ is formed in you.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andrews, Alan, ed. *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010.
- Arnold, Jeffrey. *The Big Book of Small Groups*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1991.
- Berding, Kenneth. "At the Intersection of Mission and Spiritual Formation in the Letters of Paul." *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 18–37.
- Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*. Revised and Expanded Edition. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015.
- Dettoni, John M. "What Is Spiritual Formation?" In *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Spiritual Formation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994.
- Donahue, Bill, and Russ Robinson. *Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001.
- Fee, Gordon D. "On Getting the Spirit Back into Spirituality." In *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, edited by Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010.
- Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas K. Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993.
- Fortosis, Stephen. "Theological Foundations for a Stage Model of Spiritual Formation." *Religious Education* 96, no. 1 (2001): 49–63.
- Foster, Richard J. "Becoming Like Christ." *Christianity Today* (February 5, 1996).
- . *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. Special Anniversary Edition. San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 2018.
- Fuller, Paula. "Participating in God's Mission." In *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, edited by Alan Andrews, 195–224. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010.
- Glerup, Michael. "The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Formation." In *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, edited by Alan Andrews, 251–274. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010.
- Greenman, Jeffrey P. "Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective." In *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, edited by Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010.
- Greenman, Jeffrey P., and George Kalantzis, eds. *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010.

- Grenz, Stanley J. "Ecclesiology." In *The Cambridge Companion to Post-Modern Theology*, edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 252–266. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- . *Theology for the Community of God*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994.
- Gunnells, Tim. "Forming Leaders Through Spiritual Disciplines." D. Min. diss., Harding School of Theology, 2010.
- Hall, Christopher A. "Reading Christ into the Heart: The Theological Foundations of Lectio Divina." In *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, edited by Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis, 141–159. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010.
- Halstead, Jackie L. *Leaning into God's Embrace: A Guidebook for Contemplative Prayer*. Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2021.
- Hawkins, Greg L., and Cally Parkinson. *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011.
- Hawkins, Greg L., Cally Parkinson, Eric Arnson, and Bill Hybels. *Reveal: Where Are You?* Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2007.
- Hawkins, Greg L., Cally Parkinson, John Ortberg, and Bill Hybels. *Follow Me: What's Next for You?* Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2008.
- Heflin, Houston. *Pray Like You Breathe: Exploring the Practice of Breath Prayer*. Abilene, TX: Creek Bend Press, 2017.
- Herrington, Jim, Trisha Taylor, and R. Robert Creech. *The Leader's Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation*. 2nd ed. San Francisco, CA: Baker Academic, 2020.
- Holloway, Gary, and Earl Lavender. *Living God's Love: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality*. Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2004.
- Holt, Bradley P. *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality*. Third edition. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017.
- Howard, Evan B. *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018.
- . "Advancing the Discussion: Reflections on the Study of Christian Spiritual Life." *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 10.
- . *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*. Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2008.

- . “Three Temptations of Spiritual Formation.” *Christianity Today* 46, no. 13 (December 9, 2002): 46–49.
- Hull, Bill. “Spiritual Formation from the Inside Out.” In *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, edited by Alan Andrews, 107–138. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010.
- Ignatius. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*. Edited by Anthony Mottola. New York, NY: Image Books, 2014.
- Jones, Cheslyn, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, eds. *The Study of Spirituality*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Matthews, Keith. “The Transformational Process.” In *Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, edited by Alan Andrews, 85–106. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010.
- Mulholland, M. Robert. *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation*. Edited by R. Ruth Barton. Revised and Expanded. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016.
- Nouwen, Henri J.M. *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*. New York, NY: Image Books, 1975.
- Ogden, Greg. *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time*. Revised and Expanded. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016.
- Peterson, Eugene H. *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2021.
- . *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005.
- . *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006.
- Pettit, Paul, ed. *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2008.
- Powell, Mark E., John Mark Hicks, and Greg McKinzie. *Discipleship in Community: A Theological Vision for the Future*. Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2020.
- Powell, Samuel M. *A Theology of Christian Spirituality*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005.
- Rengstort, K.H. “mathetes.” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967.
- Samra, James G. “A Biblical View of Discipleship.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160, no. 638 (June 2003): 219–234.

- Scandrette, Mark. *Practicing the Way of Jesus: Life Together in the Kingdom of Love*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011.
- Scorgie, Glen G. "Overview of Christian Spirituality." *Zondervan Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011.
- Sensing, Tim. *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011.
- Sharpe, Travis. "Discipleship Programs and Spiritual Formation: Does a Discipleship Program at Grace Bridge Church Combining a Missional/Narrative Hermeneutic with Spiritual Disciplines Lead to a Noticeable Change in Love of God and Others?" D. Min. diss., Hazelip School of Theology at Lipscomb University, 2015.
- Smith, Aubry. "Disembodied Discipleship: A Critique of the Discovery Bible Study." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (June 2021): 7–9.
- Thompson, James W. *Moral Formation According to Paul: The Context and Coherence of Pauline Ethics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011.
- . "Paul and Spiritual Formation." *Christian Studies* 24 (2010): 7–19.
- . *The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014.
- Thompson, Marjorie J. *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*. Revised Edition. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.
- Thrall, Bill, and Bruce McNicol. "Communities of Grace." In *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, edited by Alan Andrews. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010.
- Tippens, Darryl L. *Pilgrim Heart: The Way of Jesus in Everyday Life*. Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2006.
- Underwood, Lynn G. *Spiritual Connection in Daily Life: Sixteen Little Questions That Can Make a Big Difference*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2013.
- Vyhmeister, Nancy J., and Terry Dwain Robertson. *Your Guide to Writing Quality Research Papers for Students of Religion and Theology*. Third Edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014.
- Wainwright, Geoffrey. "Types of Spirituality." In *The Study of Spirituality*, edited by Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, 592–605. Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Walker family (Pseudonym). "South Asia: God's Kingdom Advancing Through Discovery Bible Studies." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (September 2019): 25–27.

- Wilhoit, James. *Spiritual Formation as If the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ Through Community*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008.
- Willard, Dallas. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*. Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress Publishing Group, 2002.
- . “Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation.” In *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, edited by Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis, 45–62. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010.
- . *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*. 1st ed. San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1998.
- . “The Gospel of the Kingdom and Spiritual Formation.” In *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, edited by Alan Andrews. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010.
- . *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’ Essential Teachings on Discipleship*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2006.
- Zscheille, Dwight J., ed. “A Missional Theology of Spiritual Formation.” In *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation*. Missional Church Series. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012.
- . “Dwelling in the Word: Affirming Its Promise.” *Word & World* 32, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 408–410.
- “About Crossroads Pregnancy Clinic.” *Crossroads Pregnancy Clinic*. Accessed October 25, 2022. <https://www.crossroadspregnancyclinic.org/about-us/>.
- “REVEAL Assessments.” *REVEAL Assessments*. Accessed October 26, 2022. <https://revealforchurch.com>.
- The Holy Bible, New International Version*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011.
- “WinterfestConference - YouTube.” Accessed October 25, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/>.

Appendix A

Definitions of Spiritual Formation

The increasingly popular term *spiritual formation* has been used in so many different ways and in so many different contexts that its meaning has become obscure and vague to many. In this project, I surveyed many authors and noted their stated understandings of spiritual formation in general. The following is a short list of some of those definitions. Compare them against your understanding of Scripture and let them inform your thoughts.

Spiritual formation is...

*... the intentional, communal process of growing in our relationship with God and being conformed to Christ through the power of the Spirit.*¹

*... ... the intentional, communal process of growing in our relationship with God and being conformed to Christ through the power of the Spirit for the sake of the world.*²

*... a process of being formed in the image of Christ for the sake of others.*³

*... a Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes the inner being of Christ himself.*⁴

*... a training process that occurs for those who are disciples of Jesus.*⁵

*... our continuing response to the reality of God's grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the community of faith, for the sake of the world.*⁶

*... the human side of the question: those means by which we seek to "work out" the transformation that the Spirit "works in."*⁷

¹ Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as If the Church Mattered*, 23.

² Zscheille, "A Missional Theology of Spiritual Formation," 7.

³ Dallas Willard, "The Gospel of the Kingdom and Spiritual Formation," in *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, ed. Alan Andrews (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 55.

⁴ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 22.

⁵ Alan Andrews, ed., *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 22.

⁶ Greenman, "Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective," 11.

⁷ Howard, "Advancing the Discussion: Reflections on the Study of Christian Spiritual Life," 13.

... is developing a heart for God.⁸

... the ongoing process of the triune God transforming the believer's life and character toward the life and character of Jesus Christ- accomplished by the ministry of the Spirit in the context of biblical community.⁹

... the intentional and semi-intentional processes by which believers (individuals and communities) become more fully conformed and united to Christ, especially with regard to maturity of life and calling.¹⁰

... a Spirit and human-led process by which individuals and communities mature in relationship with the Christian God (Father, Son, Spirit), and are changed into even greater likeness to the life and gospel of this God.¹¹

... an increasing love for God and for other people.¹²

⁸ Hull, "Spiritual Formation from the Inside Out," 121.

⁹ Paul Pettit, ed., *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2008), 24.

¹⁰ Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 268.

¹¹ Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*, 18.

¹² Hawkins et al., *Reveal*, 29.

Appendix B

Spiritual Formation Assessment Survey

(To be Given Before & After Cohort Experience)

Instructions: *Over the course of this cohort experience, we are exploring four practices known to aid in spiritual growth: (1) prayer; (2) Bible Study; (3) Serving Others; and (4) Meditative Bible reading. The following questions are meant to assess your practice of these four disciplines as it relates to your spiritual journey. Please answer them as honestly as you can, not as you wish you are, but as you honestly see yourself.*

Scale: 1- SD (Strongly Disagree); 2- D (Disagree); 3- U (Uncertain); 4- A (Agree); 5- SA (Strongly Agree)

Prayer

- 1 I think I have a good understanding of prayer as it relates to my spiritual journey.
- 2 I value the discipline of prayer as important to my spiritual journey.
- 3 I practice prayer regularly to grow in my relationship with God.
- 4 I feel satisfied with my current prayer life.
- 5 I feel closer to God because of my practice of prayer.

Bible Study

- 6 I think I have a good understanding of Bible Study as it relates to my spiritual journey.
- 7 I value the discipline of Bible study as important to my spiritual journey.
- 8 I regularly engage in Bible study to grow in my relationship with God.
- 9 I feel satisfied with my current practice of Bible study.
- 10 I feel closer to God because of my practice of Bible study.

Serving Others

- 11 I think I have a good understanding of the discipline of serving others in my spiritual journey.
- 12 I value the discipline of serving others as important to my spiritual journey.
- 13 I regularly engage in the practice of serving others to grow in my relationship with God.
- 14 I feel satisfied with my current practice of serving others.
- 15 I feel closer to God because of my practice of serving others.

Meditative Bible Reading

- 16 I think I have a good understanding of the discipline of meditative Bible reading for my spiritual journey.
- 17 I value the discipline of meditative Bible reading as important to my spiritual journey.
- 18 I regularly engage in the practice of meditative Bible reading to grow in my relationship with God.
- 19 I feel satisfied with my current practice of meditative Bible reading.
- 20 I feel closer to God because of the practice of my practice of meditative Bible reading.

Spiritual Formation

- 21 I think I have a good understanding of spiritual formation
- 22 I feel like I know what I can do to grow in my spiritual life
- 23 I have people who encourage me in my spiritual life
- 24 I feel as if I am growing in my relationship with God and greater Christ-likeness
- 25 I want to grow in my relationship with God and into greater Christ-likeness

Appendix C

Cohort Feedback Questionnaire

(To be given at the conclusion of the Cohort).

Please take a moment and consider the following open-ended questions. Your feedback will help improve this cohort experience for others in the future.

How has your view of God changed through the process of this cohort experience?

How has your view of yourself changed through this process?

Describe any "aha" moments you may have had through this process. Any turning points or moments of insight?

Which of the disciplines we discussed did you find most helpful? Why?

How would you describe your relationship with God right now?

What suggestions do you have that might improve this cohort experience for future groups?

Appendix D

Spiritual Disciplines Preference Test

Prepared by Dr. Mark Adams

(Used by Permission)

Each of us has our own ways of feeling closest to God. What moves one person deeply may bore another. This is a test to help you evaluate the ways that feel most natural to you in connecting to God. It may also help you discover some areas that you might want to target for personal growth.

For each statement, write a number from 1 to 5 beside it to indicate how you feel about the statement. There are no right or wrong answers, and everyone will be different.

Remember: Don't answer what you feel you SHOULD think; answer what you DO think.

1 - Strongly Disagree

2 - Disagree

3 - Neutral

4 - Agree

5 - Strongly Agree

_____ 1. When I've spent time reading the Bible, I feel spiritually energized.

_____ 2. When I feel uncertain, praying is the first thing I like to do.

_____ 3. Though I can be around other Christians, I connect to God best when I'm by myself.

_____ 4. I won't get much out of a worship experience unless I am allowed some time to think deeply about what I've learned.

_____ 5. When I see that God has blessed my life, it makes me want to sing for joy.

_____ 6. There is nothing I love more than being with my Christian family.

_____ 7. If I feel a need to get closer to God, it helps me to take a break from a regular part of my life to make space for Him.

_____ 8. It is only when I can talk about what's on my conscience to a trusted Christian friend that I can feel better.

_____ 9. I know God is especially near when I am making a visit to a shut-in.

_____ 10. My favorite day of Creation was day 7, when God rested. I need to do the same.

- _____ 11. If I don't know what to do, I get out a concordance and look for Bible verses that speak to my situation.
- _____ 12. When I feel down, it cheers me up to be around Christian friends.
- _____ 13. If I don't have enough time to pray, my day just doesn't feel complete.
- _____ 14. I have found that fasting helps me to de-clutter my thoughts and my life so that God can be nearer.
- _____ 15. If I'm going to connect to God, I need my personal space away from everything else.
- _____ 16. When I talk to people about my shortcomings, it makes me feel empowered to face them, so I try to do this regularly.
- _____ 17. I like to hear a deep spiritual insight, then give it lots of thought so it can be imprinted on my heart.
- _____ 18. Jesus washed the apostles' feet as an example to us, and I feel most like him when I am serving others.
- _____ 19. My favorite part of being at church is worshiping God.
- _____ 20. I need to have regular breaks in my week's schedule in order to be aware of God's presence.
- _____ 21. For me, being at a fellowship dinner with my Christian friends feels about as meaningful as the worship itself.
- _____ 22. If I want to say "yes" to God, it helps me to say "no" to myself.
- _____ 23. God feels close when I share with a friend what is burdening my heart.
- _____ 24. I think the best way for our church to be stronger Christians is for us to work harder at being good servants.
- _____ 25. For me to feel close to God, I need to rest in Him, taking a break from what creates stress in my life.
- _____ 26. The best way to improve our church is for us to give a more prominent role to us hearing and digesting the Word of God.
- _____ 27. I try to make regular time to talk to God about anything and everything. It makes me feel great when I do.
- _____ 28. Being around other Christians is important, but I function best when it is just my God and I.
- _____ 29. The best way for me to be a more Godly person is to spend more time contemplating my life and how God should be involved in it.

_____ 30. Heaven on earth for me is being able to express to God my love for Him.

Types of Spiritual Practices

Write your choice from the corresponding question number into the blanks to total up your scores in each of the types of spiritual practices. The highest you could score on any would be 15, and the lowest would be 3.

BIBLE STUDY _____ + _____ + _____ = _____ ➤ Total
 1 11 26

PRAYER _____ + _____ + _____ = _____ ➤ Total
 2 13 27

SOLITUDE _____ + _____ + _____ = _____ ➤ Total
 3 15 28

CONTEMPLATION _____ + _____ + _____ = _____ ➤ Total
 4 17 29

WORSHIP _____ + _____ + _____ = _____ ➤ Total
 5 19 30

FELLOWSHIP _____ + _____ + _____ = _____ ➤ Total
 6 12 21

FASTING _____ + _____ + _____ = _____ ➤ Total
 7 14 22

CONFESSION _____ + _____ + _____ = _____ ➤ Total
 8 16 23

SERVICE _____ + _____ + _____ = _____ ➤ Total
 9 18 24

SABBATH _____ + _____ + _____ = _____ ➤ Total
 10 20 25

Which areas did you rank the highest?

(These come most natural to you)

Which areas did you rank the lowest?

(These are less comfortable for you, but may therefore be areas you should be careful not to neglect)

Do you think the results accurately summarize what helps you feel close to God? Why or why not?

In developing a strategy, it may be helpful to think of which things you find most helpful and natural, and also which things sound least like yourself. You'll want to give the biggest part of your energy to those things which are most life-giving, but you should also be systematic about stretching yourself in other ways. All of these categories are ways in which people have grown spiritually over many centuries, and you might be surprised by how something which feels unusual to you might be beneficial in expanding on your perspectives and helping you grow.

A question to consider:

"What do I need to do in order to become the person I want to be?"

To move towards implementation, you might want to write down:

Yearly Goals

Quarterly Goals

Monthly Goals

Weekly or Daily Goals

Try to start following your own schedule and action plan for how you will try to grow spiritually. Don't be too hard on yourself. Allow times to reflect upon and modify your strategy. The main thing is to move towards action. Any deliberate actions you take that you wouldn't have otherwise you should consider victories.

Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

Washington Street Church of Christ Spiritual Formation Cohort

My name is **Jim Black** and I am a **D.Min.** student at Harding School of Theology conducting my final research project entitled, “*Transforming Disciples Through a Spiritual Formation Cohort at Washington Street Church of Christ.*” My goal is to facilitate intentional spiritual growth by equipping members of the congregation in four specific spiritual practices: prayer, Bible study, service, and meditative Bible reading.

This cohort will involve a small group of members meeting weekly over the course of nine weeks. We will learn about spiritual formation practices as well as engage in specific spiritual exercises shown to facilitate growth in the Christian life. You will be asked to commit to these weekly meetings, to participate as an active member, to complete a simple “homework” assignment each week and to encourage other members of the cohort to do the same. You will also be asked to complete both a “pre-program” survey, a short list of twenty-five questions, as well as a “post-program” survey to evaluate the effectiveness of this project.

This experience is intended to help you grow in your relationship with God. You will be a part of a small community of fellow members who will encourage you in the process of spiritual growth through our times together. This project is also important because it will be a “pilot” program designed to increase the spiritual health and maturity of our congregation. It is hoped that this can become an ongoing ministry offering to church members. The things learned from this “pilot” program will be used to improve future endeavors.

Participation is completely voluntary. If you have been asked to be a part of this project, but do not wish to, you may feel free to decline without consequence. At any point during the program, I will be glad to address any questions or concerns you may have. I will be presenting my overall findings to the Elders and in my final project dissertation to be published by HST. Your name and identity will be kept strictly confidential in all reporting and/or writings related to this study unless you provide express written consent. There is a possibility that I will want to include quotes gleaned from the final evaluation at the end of the thirteen weeks. In this event, I will obtain your express written consent to do so or maintain confidentiality by using a pseudonym.

Signing below gives your consent to being a part of this group endeavor. Before signing, please be sure that any questions you may have are answered to your satisfaction. If you agree to participate, a copy of this document will be given to you.

Participant’s signature: _____ **Date:**

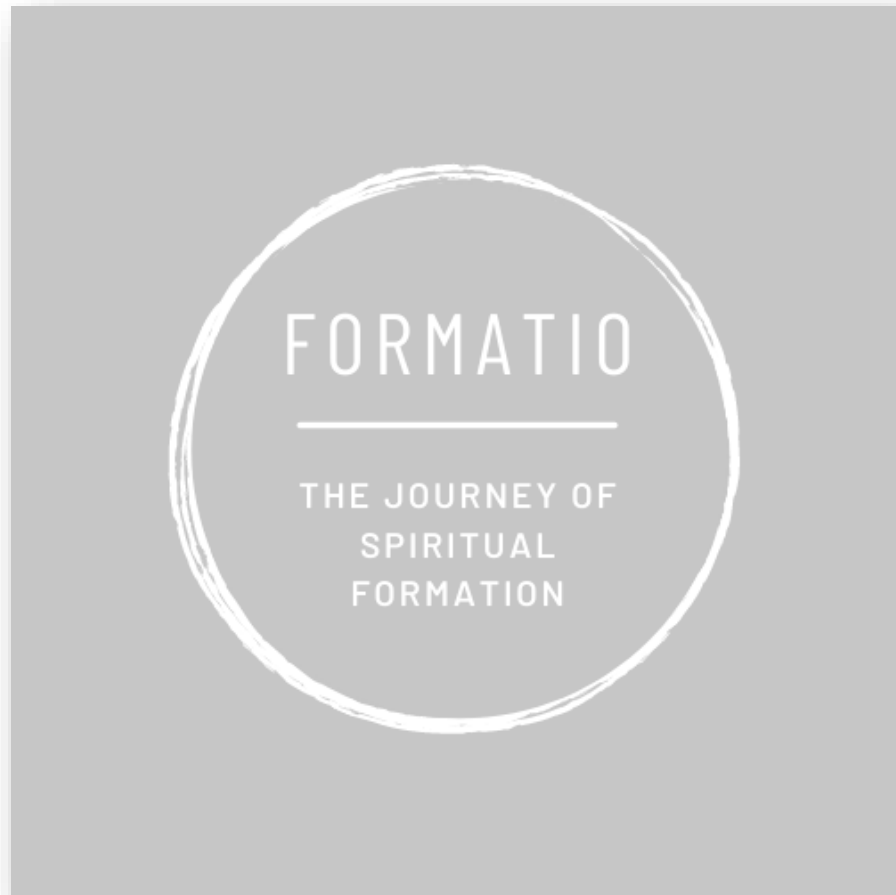
Please Print name: _____

Researcher: Jim Black, Harding School of Theology

Signature of Researcher: _____ **Date:**

Contact me for any questions: jblack5@harding.edu or (931) 993-3246

Appendix F
The Curriculum



A Nine-Week Spiritual Formation Cohort

Prepared by: Jim Black
Washington Street Church of Christ
Spring 2022



Week One: An Invitation to a Journey

Week Two: Bible Study

Week Three: Bible Study

Week Four: Meditative Reading

Week Five: Meditative Reading

Week Six: Praying Scripture

Week Seven: Prayer of Self-Examination

Week Eight: Serving Others

Week Nine: Reflection

Week One: Invitation to a Journey



It is helpful to think of the Christian life as a journey. From the time one makes the decision to set out, this journey is marked by twists and turns, detours, and unexpected obstacles along the way. While the destination must always be kept in focus, it is the journey that prepares the traveler for arrival. While the goal of spiritual formation is to grow in Christlikeness, it is important to understand that this transformation does not happen instantly when one decides to follow Jesus. It is a process. It is a process directed by the Holy Spirit and facilitated by the intentional practice of spiritual exercise. This week we will discuss the process of spiritual formation and begin to think about practices that aid us in this journey. Over the course of the next nine weeks, we will focus primarily on four of these disciplines. Thank you for joining this journey together!

Welcome to the *Formatio* cohort!

A cohort is a group of people banded together for a common purpose. In this case, our purpose will be to grow in our relationship with God and towards greater Christ-likeness together. *Formatio* is a Latin word that refers to the ways in which we are being formed as disciples of Jesus. It is often used for spiritual formation. Over the next nine weeks we will journey together through some practices which have been shown to bring about spiritual growth to those who will commit to them.

Goal Setting: What goals would you have for our time together?

- Greater **understanding** of spiritual formation
- Equipping with **spiritual practices** you can further develop
- To be a supportive **community** as we engage these practices together
- To spur on **spiritual growth** in all of us!

Foundations: Read the following texts and discuss your observations as a group:

Isaiah 64:8

Jeremiah 18:1-6

Galatians 4:19

Romans 12:2

2 Corinthians 3:18

What is Spiritual Formation?

-the process of growing in relationship with God and into greater Christ-likeness

-five key components: (1) a process; (2) the work of the Holy Spirit; (3) communal; (4) intentional; (5) for the sake of others

The Move-Reveal Study:

In the early 2000s the Willow Creek Church, a non-denominational church outside Chicago, commissioned a study of their congregation. They wanted to know which of their many programs and activities delivered the greatest spiritual growth for their members. What they discovered was that they weren't doing as well as they thought. Even among the most active members, spiritual growth had stalled, and no one knew what to do about it. They have since researched over 1,000 churches asking the same questions.

Their research did produce some helpful insights. First, they identified four segments along a spiritual growth "continuum" indicating levels of spiritual maturity: (1 Exploring Christ; (2) Growing in Christ; (3) Close to Christ; and (4) Christ-Centered. Even more helpful was their identifying several key "catalysts" shown to move individuals from one level to the next. These catalysts were a mixture of beliefs, activities, and spiritual practices. For this cohort, we will engage in some of these top spiritual practices together.

- Bible Study
- Meditative Bible Reading
- Prayer
- Serving Others

Questions for Reflection:

What do you see as God's goal for you as a disciple?

Looking back over your life, what experiences and practices have most shaped you as a disciple of Jesus?

Share a time when you felt especially close to God and growing in your faith. What differentiated this time from other times? What was going on in your life during this time? Why do you think this time was especially fruitful?

What practices do you find helpful for drawing you closer to the Lord and for strengthening your faith?

On the Road (take-home activity):

Take the Spiritual Disciplines Preference Test (prepared by Dr. Mark Adams) and reflect on the disciplines which are most formative for you. Think about ways you can begin or continue to practice them regularly. Come to the cohort next week ready to share!

Since this project is being done to complete degree requirements for my final doctoral project, I also need you to complete both: (1) a waiver acknowledging your willingness to participate in this cohort; and (2) a pre-cohort Spiritual Formation Assessment.

Week Two: Bible Study

Spiritual disciplines are intentional exercises known to spur growth and greater maturity in Christ for those who practice them regularly. The apostle Paul, in his letter to Timothy, admonishes his young mentee:



Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (1 Tim 4:7-8)

Thus, we are going to think of spiritual disciplines as those training exercises which produce in us greater godliness. Throughout this course, we will be learning about and practicing together four key exercises which have been shown to be “catalysts” for spiritual growth (Hawkinson & Parkinson, *Move*, 123). The first of these exercises, and the one probably most familiar to us, is *Bible study*.

In **Romans 12:2**, Paul tells us that we are transformed through the renewing of the mind. Richard Foster describes study as “a specific kind of experience in which through careful attention to reality, the mind is enabled to move in a certain direction” (*Celebration of Discipline*, 63.) It is about bringing the faculties of the mind to bear on Scripture for greater understanding and application of God’s Word for us. It is absolutely vital for spiritual formation. Jesus made it unmistakably clear that it is knowledge of the truth that will set us free (John 8:32). Foster agrees, “*Good feelings will not free us. Ecstatic experiences will not free us. Getting “high on Jesus” will not free us. Without a knowledge of the truth, we will not be free*” (Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 63).

Foster describes four steps involved in this study:

1. Repetition- regularly rehearsing Scripture helps to ingrain habits of thought and change behavior.
2. Concentration- centering and focusing the mind upon the text produces learning and insight.
3. Comprehension- understanding the meaning of a text.
4. Reflection- defining the significance of what is being studied leads us to a greater understanding of ourselves and aids in providing us with a clearer understanding of God’s perspective.

Study involves the process of both:

Exegesis- asking “*What does this text say?*” It is about discerning the original meaning of the text in its original context. This involves the investigation of background study, culture, and language to arrive at what the text would have meant to its original audience.

Hermeneutics- asking “*What does it mean for me?*” This is the process of application, applying the meaning of the text uncovered in exegesis to one’s contemporary situation. This is the process of interpretation and must take into account the differences in culture, time, and context of the original text.

Foundations: Read the following texts and discuss your observations as a group:

Romans 12:2

Philippians 4:8

2 Timothy 2:15

2 Timothy 3:16-17

John 8:32

One Method of Bible Study: The Discovery Bible Study

The Discovery Bible Study is a simple method of engaging the text of Scripture in almost any group setting but can be practiced by individuals as well. After a period of prayer, the selected text is read aloud. It can be a small section of a few verses or an entire chapter. It ought to be enough to elicit good discussion or thought. The study then flows out of the following questions. The goal of each question is to spark deeper thought and reflection.

- 1) What do we learn about God, his nature, character, or plan?
- 2) What do we learn about ourselves, our nature, our weaknesses, and our needs?
- 3) How do I need to respond to this text?
- 4) Who will I share this with this week?

Additional questions could include:

5. What do I find appealing in this text?
6. What do I find challenging in this text?
7. What in this text did I find hard to understand?
8. How would I summarize the overall message of this text in my own (few) words?

Questions for Reflection:

What Bible study methods have been most beneficial for you? Have you found an approach that best suits you?

What does your practice of Bible study look like? What habits have you cultivated?

What tools do you most often use in your study? (Commentaries, Bible dictionaries, online resources)

On the Road (take-home activity):

Spend 10-15 minutes reading your Bible each day taking notice of each of the above questions of Discovery Bible Study. Our goal is for this to develop into a habit over the next two weeks.

Discovery Bible Study

Spend 10-15 minutes of focused attention on reading your Bible each day for the next week. Come next week prepared to discuss your experience with the group.

- 1) What do we learn about God, his nature, character, or plan?
- 2) What do we learn about ourselves, our nature, our weaknesses, and our needs?
- 3) How do I need to respond to this text?
- 4) Who will I share this with this week?

Additional questions could include:

1. What do I find appealing in this text?
2. What do I find challenging in this text?
3. What in this text did I find hard to understand?
4. How would I summarize the overall message of this text in my own (few) words?

Please follow this guide. Feel free to journal or to jot down notes from your time with the Lord.

Day One: Matthew 1

Day Two: Matthew 2

Day Three: Matthew 3

Day Four: Matthew 4

Day Five: Matthew 5

Day Six: Matthew 6

Day Seven: Matthew 7

Week Three: Bible Study

"[The spiritual disciplines] simply put us in a place where we can begin to notice God and respond to his word to us." — Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us



"The Bible is there to enable God's people to be equipped to do God's work in God's world, not to give them an excuse to sit back smugly, knowing they possess all God's truth." -- N. T. Wright

"I feel about John's gospel like I feel about my wife; I love her very much, but I wouldn't claim to understand her." -- N. T. Wright

Debriefing Questions: How did it go?

What was the most difficult or challenging thing for you about the practice of Bible study this week?

What was the most rewarding thing for you about this practice?

Tell us about any "aha" moments or insightful thoughts that you might have had in your practice this week.

How was this practice different for you, or was it? Describe your regular practice of Bible study and how it was different.

What challenges or obstacles did you face in your practice? Did it have to do with time management, focus or attention, distractions, or inability to access the text for understanding?

Did you consult any Bible helps (other translations, dictionaries, encyclopedias, online tools, etc.)? If so, what?

Furthering the practice of Bible Study

What new ideas or insights did you hear from these two short videos?

N.T. Wright

Bob Young

Bible Study TOGETHER (Matthew 7:1-12)

Let's read a chapter from our assignment last week and walk thru it TOGETHER.

- 1) *What do we learn about God, his nature, character, or plan?*
- 2) *What do we learn about ourselves, our nature, our weaknesses, and our needs?*
- 3) *How do I need to respond to this text?*
- 4) *Who will I share this with this week?*
- 5) *What do I find appealing in this text?*
- 6) *What do I find challenging in this text?*
- 7) *What in this text did I find hard to understand?*
- 8) How would I summarize the overall message of this text in my own (few) words?

On the Road (take-home activity):

This week let's try reading one book (Colossians) all the way through in one sitting at least three times before we regather next time.

Jot down or journal about any insights that you may have.

1st Read-thru

2nd Read-thru

3rd Read-thru

Week Four: Meditative Bible Reading

“Knowing God, not knowing more, is the goal.” -Richard Rohr

*How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!
(Ps 119:103 NIV)*



Debriefing Questions: Bible Study- How did it go?

What was the most difficult or challenging thing about reading an entire section or book multiple times this week?

What was the most rewarding?

Describe any “aha” moments or insights you may have received in your reading.

In what ways did you find this approach different than the previous approach of reading thru a section or book piece by piece?

Practice #2: A Meditative Approach

Very often we read the Bible to understand facts and gain knowledge. In fact, our practice last two weeks focused on this. This is a valuable approach, but we should not read Scripture only to gain knowledge. This was a problem with the Pharisees—Jesus said they were guilty of “studying the Scriptures diligently” because they thought they had eternal life in them, but in all their studying, they completely missed the true source of life—Jesus (John 5:39-40). Our study of Scripture cannot stop at head knowledge; it must affect our hearts, minds, souls, and lives. It was never about mere head knowledge; God wanted to change the lives of his people through Scripture. God wants the same thing for us today.

The practice of meditative reading or lectio divina is a time-honored traditional approach that Christians have used for centuries. Its purpose is to make Scripture reading a heart-oriented exercise instead of just a head-oriented one. Instead of seeking knowledge alone, we are seeking to allow the words of Scripture to saturate our lives. It is the taking in of Scripture, “chewing on it” so to speak, digesting the words into our bodies and allowing them to nourish our souls. This devotional reading should be done slowly and with a short passage (6-8 verses). The goal is not to cover a lot of ground, but rather to take time to reflect deeply on the word of God and open our lives to receive His word for our lives.

Foundations: *Read the following texts and discuss your observations as a group*

Ezekiel 3:1-3

Psalms 119:11

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

The Movements of a Meditative Reading of Scripture

- **Listen**- Enter into the moment with an open heart, expecting to hear. Just quietly listen to the reading. Let the words wash over you. Imagine the scene being painted with the words from Scripture. Pay attention to what is being described through the reading of God's word.
- **Meditate**- As you re-read it, what specific word or phrase captures your attention? Something that seems to resonate, disturb, challenge, or comfort? Latch on to that word. If journaling, write it down—if in a group, speak the word or phrase without explanation, commentary, or judgment. If alone without writing materials—speak it out loud to yourself and God. Meditate on it and ask yourself why it has stood out to you in this reading.
- **Pray**- After time for silent reflection, go deeper into the word or phrase. What is it about this word or phrase that seems to resonate with you? Why does it seem to connect with you? What has this word brought to your heart that you need to take to the Lord in prayer? How do you need to respond to it?
- **Contemplate**- Sit with your reflections on this word and how it connects to your life. What are its implications for you? How is God communicating to you through this reading? What do you think God is saying to you personally? What does it mean for you as a community?

Questions for Reflection:

What did you find helpful about this practice?

Was anything about this practice strange or awkward for you?

What about this practice was different from how you usually approach Scripture?

Do you think this is a positive way to approach Scripture?

Could you see yourself doing this practice regularly?

On the Road (take-home activity):

Choose other texts to meditate upon throughout the week and come back next time ready to share. (Psalm 23; Philippians 4:4-9; Psalm 51)

Week Five: Meditative Bible Reading/ Dwelling in the Word

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight,

O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.” (Ps 19:14 NIV)



Debriefing Questions: Meditative Reading- How did it go?

Share about your practice this week of meditative reading. How did it go?

What texts did you select to meditate upon and how were they beneficial?

Did you find it helpful in any way? Was it challenging? How so?

Did you feel any awkwardness at first? How did that change the more you practiced it?

Texts:

Joshua 1:8

Psalms 63:6-8

Practice: Dwelling in the Word

Thank you for your efforts in practicing meditative reading this week. Meditation is not about emptying the mind so that there is nothing there. Christian meditation opens us to the mind of God and his world. As we enter into meditation, we need to let go of our preoccupations and distractions so that we can focus our minds and be fully present to God. This can be really difficult for some of us! Yet, meditation is a way for us to train the mind to “stay put” so that we can more fully focus on the text and rest in the presence of God.

Remember the Movements of Meditative Reading:

Listen - Meditate - Pray - Contemplate

Additional Suggested Texts:

Psalms 42

Matthew 5:1-16

Psalms 136

Psalms 86

Matthew 6:9-13

On the Road (take-home activity):

The term “dwelling in the word” is often used to refer to this practice of meditative reading where one takes a single passage of Scripture and returns to it over a period of several days. Last week you may have used several passages to meditate upon. This week, our challenge will be to take a single text and return to it three to four times throughout the week. Make note of how each time is different or similar and if there are any observations you might have from returning to the same set of verses each time. You also might try choosing a text from a genre different from the ones you read last week.

Week Six: Contemplative Prayer

“... pray without ceasing” 1 Thess. 5:17-18 (NKJV)



Debriefing Questions: Dwelling in the Word

Share about your practice this week of dwelling in the Word. How did it differ for you to dwell on a single passage all week rather than multiple?

Do you think reading Scripture in this way might become a continuing practice for you?

Contemplative Prayer Practices

What exactly is contemplative prayer? Some have described it as passive prayer, in contrast to active prayer. Active prayer is prayer in which we set the agenda. We decide the content. This prayer includes components articulated by acronyms such as ACTS (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication) or PRAY (praise, requests, adoration, and yielding). Contemplative prayer, on the other hand, is the listening side of prayer. It is being with God in a manner that allows God to set the agenda. In his book *Living in the Presence*, Tilden Edwards states that contemplative prayer is about being still and letting God answer- sometimes with words but most often with a loving presence. He goes on to define contemplative prayer as “a state of quiet appreciation, simply hollowed out for God.” (Excerpt from *Leaning into God’s Embrace* by Jackie L. Halstead)

For our practice of contemplative prayer this week, we will focus on a more specific form of allowing the words of Scripture to form our prayer, often called breath prayer, as a way of clearing our minds and centering our thoughts on God, to “pray without ceasing” in a way.

Breath prayers are short, mostly one-sentence, prayers that believers in God have been praying for centuries. These prayers are often repeated, and they are often aligned with a person’s breathing so that the first half of a sentence is prayed while inhaling and the second half of the sentence is prayed while exhaling. (Houston Heflin, *Pray Like You Breathe*)

One of the most well-known and often-practiced of these breath prayers is called “The Jesus Prayer.” It is a combination of several texts from the Gospels and is simply, “*Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,*” or some variation. Matthew 9:27, Mark 10:47, and Luke 18:38 record this plea coming from blind men. The Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:22 as well as lepers in Luke 17:13 voice it as well. The early church fathers adopted the practice, and it became the most famous of the monastic prayers. It is still routinely practiced in the Eastern Church.

Foundational Texts:

Luke 18:1

Philippians 4:6

1 Thessalonians 5:17

Practice:

- Spend a few minutes (5-10) silently repeating this “Jesus Prayer.”
- As you breathe IN, pray the first half of the verse silently before God. As you EXHALE, pray the second half. Continue as your prayer aligns with the rhythm of your breathing.
- As you pray, think about God’s mercy that is extended to us every time we breathe. Celebrate God’s gift of life today in the rhythm of this breath prayer.
- Reflect on how this experience blessed you. Discuss it with the group or journal about it privately.

Questions for Reflection:

Was it hard for you to sync your breathing patterns with the prayer of the verse? What made it challenging or distracting for you?

How might this be a way to “pray without ceasing” as Paul admonished?

How do you see this practice enhancing your present prayer life?

What other examples of short, repetitive prayers can you think of from the Bible?

Benefits to praying Scripture in this way:

- It helps us learn Scripture
- It helps us focus our attention
- It gives us words to say
- It serves as a reminder to return to God throughout the day

Examples of good breath prayers:

- Psalm 23:1
- Psalm 51:10
- Psalm 86:4
- Psalm 119:11

On the Road (take-home activity):

Select a verse for the week and make this a breath prayer to return to throughout your week. Choose a Scripture like the ones listed above as examples. It needs to be short with two basic lines, but also one that is meaningful for you. Look for moments to recall it to mind and pray.

Week Seven: Contemplative Prayer

Ps 139:1-4

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. 2 You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. NIV



Reflection: The Practice of Breath Prayer

Share about your practice of contemplative prayer this week. How did your experience go?

How did you find this to enhance your time of prayer or meditation? Did you find yourself coming back to your Scripture prayer throughout the day?

What Scriptures did you choose for your breath prayers?

Is this something that you see could become a part of your regular routine of devotion?

Contemplative Prayer (part two): The Examen

The daily examen is an exercise of self-reflection which finds its roots in the spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556 AD). Ignatius lived a pretty pagan life as a young man in sixteenth-century Spain. He had all the advantages of wealth and a place in the royal court as an apprentice to the king's treasurer. He was said to be vain, flirtatious with the ladies, and valiant in battle. His demeanor changed, however, after being injured in battle and spending a year in convalescence in his family's castle. He had little to distract him, save two books on the life of Christ and the lives of the saints. He spent hour upon hour devouring them and imagining his life in service to the Lord. After giving himself to the Lord's service in the church, he dedicated himself to the development of a program of prayer that would draw participants closer to God and into greater spiritual maturity and Christlikeness. The practice of the daily examen derives from his work (Halstead, 41-42).

The goal of the daily examen is to notice where God shows up in our day (Calhoun, 59). Through a series of questions, the individual reflects upon their day looking intentionally for moments when God's presence seemed especially clear, moments for which to be thankful, acts which need to be confessed towards forgiveness, and reasons for hope. It is a prayerful exercise as each of these moments are brought to the Lord and dealt with appropriately. It can be practiced alone in silence or as a group.

Read the following texts and discuss your observations as it relates to the topic of self-examination:

Matthew 7:1-5

1 Corinthians 11:31-32


2 Corinthians 13:5

The Practice of Self Examen


- In silence reflect upon your day retracing your steps from morning till evening. Ask God to help you recall to mind the countless moments you spent in your day. Where did you go? What jobs or tasks did you do? Who did you interact with throughout the day? How did you spend your day? Ask yourself, where did I feel God's presence? Where did I not feel his presence?



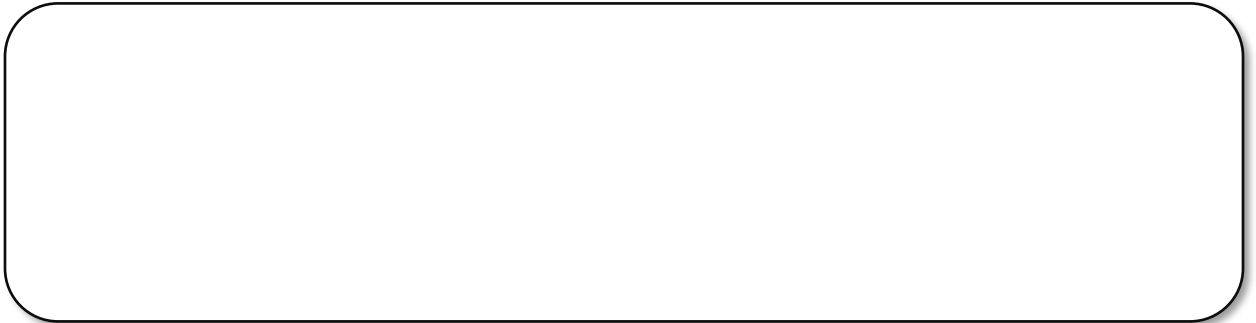
- As you review your day look for moments for which to give thanks, considering them as gifts from God, moments that brought you joy or pleasure. Life-giving moments. Maybe it was the aroma of coffee brewing in the morning, a smile from a coworker, or a beautiful rainbow or sunset? Maybe it was an opportunity you had to be helpful and bless someone else. Express your thanksgiving to God for these gifts. When did you give and receive the most love? When today did you have the deepest sense of connection with God... with others... with yourself?



- Next, reflect on moments in your day that brought you sorrow or pain, or frustration. Things which were “life-taking” from you. Maybe it was criticism from someone or a harsh word you spoke to another. Maybe it was a disappointment at work or school. Maybe it was a missed opportunity or a failure to speak a word for Him. When did you give and receive the least love today? When today did you feel most disconnected from God... from others... even from yourself?



- Ask God to show you things in your day for which you need forgiveness. These may be words said (or left unsaid), or actions you need to bring before God in confession. Where was I aware of living out of the fruit of the Spirit... or an absence of the fruit of the Spirit?



- After you have sought God’s forgiveness, intentionally receive it and express thanksgiving. Ask God to help you as you look forward to a new day and new opportunities. Where will you seek God tomorrow and where will you look for him to show up?



Questions for Reflection:

How do you tend to recognize God's presence in your day? How do you typically respond?

What insights about yourself and God did you have in this practice?

What are your biggest personal reasons for not spending more time in self-examination? How might you work to overcome these?

If you were to practice a variation of this exercise reflecting on the past week... the past month or the year, how might it go?

On the Road Activity: Repeat this exercise several times this week, perhaps at night before you go to bed or in the morning- whichever is more conducive to your schedule. You might journal about insights that come to the surface.

You might also try taking a larger section of time... a week, a month, or a season. What insights might this reveal?

Resources:

Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*. Revised and Expanded Edition. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015.

Halstead, Jackie L. *Leaning into God's Embrace: A Guidebook for Contemplative Prayer*. Abilene, Texas: Leafwood Publishers, 2021.

Ignatius, and Anthony Mottola. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*. New York: Image Books, 2014.

Week Eight: Serving Together

Learn the lesson that, if you are to do the work of a prophet, what you need is not a scepter but a hoe. -Bernard of Clairvaux (quoted in Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline, p. 126)



Reflection: The Daily Examen

Share about your practice of the prayer of examen this week. How did your experience go?

How did you find this to enhance your time of prayer or meditation? Was it hard for you to focus?

Is this something that you see could become a part of your regular routine of devotion?

The Practice of Serving Together:

While the practices of engaging Scripture and prayer are powerful exercises of spiritual formation and can facilitate much growth in the life of a disciple, it is also the case that some people connect best with God by *doing*. Adele Calhoun writes, “Many Americans spend their lives working themselves into a place where they can be served more than serve.” Indeed, to be “king” or “queen” for a day is everyone’s dream! However, Scripture provides us with a different perspective. When God called Abram and told him that he was going to make him into a great nation, he also said, “all nations on the earth will be blessed through him” (Gen. 18:18). The trajectory of the Old Testament story is God blessing the earth through his people.

The discipline of serving others also follows the example of Jesus who came not to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45). No one is more like Jesus than when they are serving others in his name. It is an exercise of humility. It is an exercise of generosity, and it is an exercise of submission. It is also an act of mission. “The Christian discipline of service is the way the world discovers the love of God. We are the way God blesses the earth” (Calhoun, 168). This week we will be reflecting on ways we have grown through service and looking for more opportunities to do so.

Read the following texts and discuss your observations as a group:

John 13:1-17

James 1:22-23

Matthew 25:31-46

Acts 9:36-43

Questions for Reflection:

How do you feel as you are serving with others? Does it exhaust you or “fill your tank”?

How does it feel to be loved by someone “as he or she loves themselves”?

Share a favorite memory of serving that impacted your life.

What hinders you from serving more regularly and in greater ways? Are you limited in time, energy, etc.? How might you be able to free up more time to make serving a higher priority?

What would it look like if our church became known, like Dorcas, for “always doing good”?

On the Road: This week we want to challenge you to look for opportunities to serve in a way you have not before. Try something new. If you are unsure of what you might do, pray about it. Ask around. There are always needs around us, if we would open our eyes and see. Or every morning this week, look for an opportunity to do “one act of kindness” for a stranger.

Resources:

Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*. Revised and Expanded Edition. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015.

Foster, Richard J. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. Special Anniversary Edition. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2018.

Week Nine: Reflection & Developing a Rule of Life

*“It is my conviction that our heavenly Father says the same to us every day:
‘My dear child, you must always remember who you are.’” -John Stott*



Thank you for being a part of this experiment in spiritual formation and for making our *Formatio* cohort a wonderful experience! It is my hope that you have learned and grown in your relationship with the LORD thru the exercises we've practiced together and thru our time together. Tonight, we want to take a moment to celebrate this experience and to reflect back upon our time thinking of the things we benefited from as well as the things which may not have been so helpful. What did we learn? What practices will we hold onto and what will we leave behind... or perhaps lay aside to pick up later? Please share so that we can grow and learn together. And thanks again!

Reflect:

Which of our sessions together were the most helpful to you and why?

Which were the least helpful? Why?

Which did you find the most challenging?

Which do you see yourself continuing to practice and grow in?

What would you add about each of the following practices?

- Discover Bible Study
- Meditative Reading (*lectio divina*)
- Dwelling in the Word
- Breath Prayer
- Daily Examen
- Serving Together?

On the Road: Towards Developing a Rule of Life

The word *rule* comes from the Latin *regula*, from which we get words like “regular” or “regulate.” Developing a rule of life is a way to organize your life to ensure that you are doing what is important to you and necessary to keep your faith growing and your character strong. A rule of life centers around two questions: (1) Who do I want to be? and (2) How do I want to live? Thus, the question becomes, “How should I live so that I become who I want to be?”

This week the assigned task is to think of those practices or activities that help you to grow and develop an intentional plan to follow thru and put them into practice regularly. Some may be daily practices, but others may be weekly, monthly, or even yearly. These questions may help...

- When I want to be closer to God, what practices do I find most helpful?
- What are problem areas in my life, weaknesses, that need to be changed or redeemed?
- What activities stretch me as a Christian?
- When in my life can I realistically make more space for God?
- How will I hold myself accountable?

Resources Recommended

For Further Growth, I recommend the following excellent resources:

Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*. Revised and Expanded Edition. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015.

Foster, Richard J. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. Special Anniversary Edition. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2018.

Halstead, Jackie L. *Leaning into God's Embrace: A Guidebook for Contemplative Prayer*. Abilene, Texas: Leafwood Publishers, 2021.

Holloway, Gary, and Earl Lavender. *Living God's Love: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality*. Abilene, Texas: Leafwood Publishers, 2004.

Mulholland, M. Robert, and R. Ruth Barton. *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation*. Revised and Expanded. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016.

Tippens, Darryl L. *Pilgrim Heart: The Way of Jesus in Everyday Life*. Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2006.

Whitney, Donald S. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. Colorado Springs, Colo: NavPress, 1997.

Willard, Dallas. *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*. 1st ed. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998.

_____. *Renovation of the Heart 10th Anniversary Ed: Putting on the Character of Christ*. Place of publication not identified: Navpress Publishing Group, 2012.

_____. *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. 1st ed. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988.