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A Holistic Spiritual Formation Model for
Selected Chinese Evangelical Churches in the G.T.A.

A Research Portfolio
submitted in partial fulfillment
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by

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ABSTRACT

A holistic spiritual formation journey includes knowing the revealed and hidden aspects of God with our minds *and* our hearts. This is integral to Christian formation and facilitating authentic spiritual transformation in the Christian life. Based on my personal experiences, Chinese evangelical churches have put a strong emphasis on teaching biblical knowledge and encouraging services in ministry and missions. There is a lack of putting the same emphasis on providing channels that guide congregants in nurturing deeper spiritual intimacy with God which leads to whole life transformation.

This portfolio includes a spiritual autobiography (Chapter 2) that traces my own spiritual path from being nurtured through acquiring biblical knowledge to growing in my spiritual intimacy with God through applying ancient spiritual practices such as silence and solitude and spiritual companionship.

Chapter 3 provides a holistic formation model for Chinese evangelical churches and features four types of Christian spirituality: cognitive spirituality, experiential spirituality, contemplative spirituality, and societal regeneration spirituality. Chapter 4 uses the practice of group spiritual direction in a qualitative research project to determine whether the practice nurtures spiritual transformation of Chinese evangelical Christians. The results from the project affirmed that group spiritual direction did deepen the participants' spiritual intimacy with God and with other believers as well as their commitment to practicing the spiritual disciplines.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This research portfolio was birthed during a time in my spiritual journey when I was feeling perplexed about the health of the Chinese evangelical church. I had entered the spiritual formation program desiring to discover what the Christian life could offer beyond what I had been exposed to and experienced. Since coming to Canada, I have consistently attended Sunday worship, Sunday school, fellowship programs, and even weekly prayer meetings. Whenever I share with people about my commitment to being involved in church life, I am often told that I am a ‘rare breed,’ particularly by people who have grown skeptical about the church model in the present generation.

In 1999, shortly after completing my seminary studies, I began my pastoral ministry. I have been doing so for the past 18 years; almost 14 of those years have been dedicated to serving local churches. Eager to pursue and know God more richly, I studied different educational resources, seeking to equip myself with biblical knowledge and faithfully live the Christian life. Meanwhile, I served fervently in my pastoral ministries, preaching, teaching Sunday school, leading small groups, writing small group material, providing pastoral care

through counseling and visitation, and partaking in evangelism and outreach programs. I was very enthusiastic about teaching others what I learned.

In time, however, I found myself exhausted, and discovered that many leaders in my circle were suffering from the same symptoms. Furthermore, I was bewildered that despite all this religious activity, I felt no inner transformation, nor did I see it in our loving community, even when we knew of Jesus's promise of an abundant life (John 10:10). One senior pastor of a Baptist church even admitted to me that he would be glad if there was just one evening that he would be able to stay home without having to attend any church events during the week. Amid all the events and activities taking place in the church, deep down in my heart I began to feel that something was missing. At the time, I could not pinpoint the problem, but later I found it described by Dallas Willard in his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*:

Seventeen years of ministerial efforts in a wide range of denominational settings had made it clear to me that what Christians were normally told to do, the standard advice to church-goers, was not advancing them spiritually. Of course, most Christians had been told by me as by others to attend the services of the church, give of time and money, pray, read the Bible, do good to others, and witness to their faith... But just as certainly something more was needed... All pleasing and doctrinally sound schemes of Christian education, church growth, and spiritual renewal came around at last to this disappointing result. (Willard 1999, 18)

Likewise, in Ruth Barton's book *Life Together in Christ*, she cited Barna's survey which found that 52% of self-identified Christians believe that there must be more to the Christian life than what they are experiencing, and 46 percent confessed that "their life has not changed at all as a result of going to church"

(Barton 2014, 11). I believe one of the problems was that although ‘mature’ Christians (including church leaders and pastors) possessed sound biblical knowledge and committed themselves to Christian service, their characters did not positively reflect Christ. I witnessed this reality in my past two ministry experiences.

As I was writing my spiritual autobiography (Chapter 2), I gradually came to recognize the intricacies of God’s sovereign activity in my life. All these years, I have been blessed with great discipleship opportunities, including godly mentors, enlightening classes, and edifying conferences. They have equipped me with sound biblical knowledge, principles, and guidelines for navigating the life and demands of pastoral ministry. However, I came to realize that all the knowledge that I acquired was not sufficient for personal transformation.

In my Christian circle (comprising mainly those in the Chinese evangelical community), spirituality has been reduced to two elements: first, the more we know, the more spiritual we become; second, the more we serve, the more we demonstrate our faithfulness and dedication. This seemed to be the unspoken motto. Early on in my pastoral ministry, I sought to live by this motto, believing that this ‘wholehearted’ activity and service would lead to an abundant life in Christ. I even had a weekly pastoral timesheet, and I was proud of how many recorded hours were committed to my ministry. This timesheet had to be submitted to the church office, for this was one Baptist church’s system of accountability, a way of measuring the ‘faithfulness’ of its workers. But what

about our spiritual life? Who was measuring our spiritual fruitfulness and Christ-likeness? Churches I have served in evaluated the quality of a ministry by evaluating the amount of work that was done and its tangible effectiveness. Outwardly, it appeared to be ‘faithful work;’ however, inwardly, I was not experiencing spiritual transformation. Nevertheless, I tried to keep up with their standards of productivity, considering myself spiritual in the eyes of my leaders.

It was through my experiencing a number of trials that this system of measuring one’s faithfulness began to crumble. Increasingly, I felt I was living an inauthentic Christian life as I sought to please the church leadership through the attendance of increased and demanded activity. I developed an angry, self-righteous, critical, and bitter spirit that I could no longer hide. At the same time, this painful struggle in my spiritual journey served to shape me to be more like Jesus. In James Wilhoit’s book *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*, he states:

God’s mysterious method of persuasion is the path of pain. Affliction opens the heart to a change in direction. Doubt, confusion, even radical struggle are required before we are inclined to surrender to his goodness. Surrender is not possible without a fight. Although we should not glorify the struggle, it is apparently provoked by God and is therefore part of the process of transformation. (Wilhoit 2008, 65)

The painful experiences I faced forced me to know God more deeply. Helpless, alone, and desperate, I began to encounter the holy God through other means. Upon learning about the spiritual disciplines later on in my pastoral ministry, I sought refuge in silence, solitude, reflection, and spiritual companionship with soul friends and a spiritual director. These were formational moments for me and they

provided me with an opportunity to become intimate with God, to truly absorb the spiritual knowledge I had attained, and to quiet myself and listen attentively to God's leading in my daily living. This ultimately became my journey toward spiritual transformation.

Upon completing my spiritual autobiography, I began to see how I have always been drawn to God's beauty. Even prior to my conversion, I had a sense of the divine through beholding the beautiful. In *Beautiful Orthodoxy*, Mark Galli states that "when we behold something beautiful, we start thinking about God" (Galli 2016, 50). Thomas Aquinas describes beauty as embodying "integrity, proportion and clarity (that is luminosity)" (Galli 2016, 51). I yearned to encounter the divine through art, music, nature, animals, people, and circumstances. These became my path toward pursuing "a life of beautiful orthodoxy" (Galli 2016, 12), or what philosophy refers to as *transcendent*, that is, "the good, the true and the beautiful" (Galli 2016, 12). I was also able to witness the beautiful amid the consequences of human sinfulness. I experienced a number of traumatic experiences in both my family and ministry life, yet God enabled me to see His grace working in the midst of my pain.

I also came to see that I delighted in beautiful experiences of hospitality. Extending hospitality took shape in my pastoral ministry as I sought opportunities to share God's love in my community. To me, authentic hospitality is seen in the way Jesus welcomed Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) and the way the woman wet the feet of Jesus with her tears and wiped them with her hair (Luke 7:36-50). They

were perceived as sinners by the religious leaders, the ones who possessed biblical knowledge and claimed to be serving God. Ironically, it was these holy leaders who failed to extend hospitality to those who needed it. This attitude was what I observed of many church leaders and under which I suffered many hurts. I came to see a big gap between authentic, godly leaders and those who were only biblically knowledgeable and active in ministry but lacked the spiritual fruitfulness that came with a genuinely transformed life.

In Chapter 3, I explain the lessons I learned through difficult ministry experiences, and I show how a holistic spiritual model is necessary to improve the spiritual health of these Chinese evangelical churches I encountered. I have found that these churches put too strong an emphasis on equipping believers with Bible knowledge and urging them to actively serve in ministry; they fail to guide believers in practicing the spiritual disciplines which are necessary to empower believers to live the Christian life with spiritual strength. This spiritual strength comes from an authentic personal experience of God; grounded in knowledge of the Bible, believers can grow through life-giving spiritual exercises. For a deeper spiritual life, believers must be taught to engage with Scripture meditatively and prayerfully. Moreover, they can begin to discern God's will for their lives through developing soul friendships (ones that provide spiritual direction) and spending time in silence and solitude. These are the experiential and contemplative disciplines that can bring spiritual strength to ministry work.

This truth can be seen in the life of the Apostle Paul. He was transformed through his personal encounter with Jesus in Damascus. It was not his religious knowledge that led him to a radical transformation upon meeting the Lord. In fact, relying solely on his knowledge of the law (1 Phil. 3:5) eventually led him to do more harm than good, to both himself and others during his faith journey. It was through persecutions and trials that he encountered Christ's amazing love and comfort, even during his imprisonment (1 Cor. 9:1; 2 Cor. 4:7-10; 2 Cor. 12:7-10). His personal encounter with Christ brought him inner renewal and he was therefore strengthened and empowered to do the work of God and be a powerful witness. Likewise, one of the sources of Jesus's strength in his ministry was rooted in his commitment to the spiritual disciplines, as seen in his retreating from the crowd and spending time in solitude and prayer prior to and amid his demanding ministries (Matt. 4:1-2; 14: 13; 14:23).

The challenges I encountered during my 18 years as a pastor in Chinese evangelical churches in the Greater Toronto Area enabled me to observe that there is a lack of holistic spiritual formation. I saw that these churches need a spiritual formation model that teaches them life-giving spiritual practices that guide Christians toward a process of being transformed in the image of Jesus Christ through the rhythms of daily living. In essence, Christians in these churches need a model that engages both the head *and* the heart so that they can have a genuine encounter with the revealed God and the mystical God.

The above can be illustrated by an analogy of the digestive process, which can explain the transfer of mere head knowledge of God to a personal, nourishing experience of God. Learning and acquiring biblical knowledge is like the mechanical act of chewing food, such as reading the Bible or listening to sermons. However, just like how food does not, and must not, simply remain in the mouth but must be swallowed and digested by the body, spiritual knowledge cannot simply be mechanically acquired but must be truly absorbed for the proper nourishment of the soul. This is achieved in two ways: first, through spiritual practices that facilitate a deeper experience of God, and second, by providing a contemplative environment that allows for spiritual reflection.

Chapter 3 provides a model for experiencing authentic spirituality, inviting us to experience God and spend time with God through different spiritual practices. The spiritual practices such as daily examen and spiritual direction, help us to encounter God in daily life. In the digestive process, organs such as the stomach and intestines work together to ensure the body absorbs the necessary nutrients; likewise, contemplative spiritual practices such as silence, solitude and retreats function like the body's organs, working together in a variety of ways to enable the absorption of God's Word so that the believer acquires the necessary spiritual nutrients. Holistic spiritual formation therefore provides healthy nurturing of the soul as it enables true digestion of spiritual food, which is then manifested in the believer's life through his or her authentic and growing relationship with God, revealed in his or her expression of love for God.

To engage in holistic spiritual practices is to engage in and to facilitate missional living, which involves the body in actions. Spiritually renewed by these practices, missional living follows from them. We naturally commit ourselves to serving our community or society by living a missional life—seeing God in our everyday circumstances, walking as Jesus did, showing a deeper love for God and our neighbours, and participating in the redemptive work of God through even the smallest gestures. This has represented my experiences in the past few years of doctoral study. Gradually, I became more intentional in creating space for silence, solitude, and retreats; I learned to honor the Sabbath and embrace different forms of prayer in my daily life. Rather than relying solely on planned church events and outreach programs, I developed a missional lifestyle in which I exercised my Christian faith by caring for God’s creation and intentionally talking to and caring for my neighbors.

This new model helped me to resolve my perplexity about the unfruitfulness of church leaders, even though they possessed sound biblical knowledge and actively served God in their ministries. Dallas Willard, in his journal *Spiritual Disciplines, Spiritual Formation and the Restoration of the Soul*, explains the problem:

Indeed, solitude and silence are powerful means of grace. Bible study, prayer and church attendance, among the most commonly prescribed activities in Christian circles, generally have little effect for soul transformation, as is obvious to any observer. If all the people doing them were transformed to health and righteousness by it, the world would be vastly changed. Their failure to bring about the change is precisely because the body and soul are so exhausted, fragmented and conflicted that the prescribed activities cannot be appropriately engaged, and by the

large degenerate into legalistic and ineffectual rituals. Lengthy solitude and silence, including rest, can make them very powerful. (Willard 1998, 107)

In his explanation Willard points out the shocking reality and reason for an untransformed soul. A lack of contemplative practices such as silence, solitude, and rest has turned many church activities and services into legalistic rituals. On the other hand, appropriate application of these activities and services can allow them to become spiritually-enriching when contemplative practices exist alongside them.

Willard's description represents part of my own experience: occasionally, I had plunged into ineffectual rituals, tirelessly trying to meet up all church events required. I recall attending a few church prayer meetings where there was a very long list of prayer items that the pastor began to pray for—one-by-one—and all I wanted to do was scream and run out of the room. These meetings were non-life-giving, held under the holy description of “prayer meeting,” but lacking spiritual substance. Rather than feeling liberated, I felt smothered. In a way, it was a form of spiritual food that was indigestible, its form and taste displeasing to the soul. A lack of holistic or contemplative practices can prevent believers from experiencing authentic spiritual transformation, which is essential to enjoying a loving, personal, and intimate relationship with God. The proposed model seeks to present different ancient and contemporary spiritual practices to believers that will facilitate spiritual vitality in all its beauty.

Chapter 4 presents one of the spiritual disciplines in the model: group spiritual direction, which is my action research project. The project involved six participants from two different churches. They formed a spiritual community that followed group spiritual direction, and the aim was to deepen the participants' spiritual intimacy with God, with people, and their commitment to daily spiritual practices. Prior to this, the participants attended a weekend retreat that introduced them to the idea of group spiritual direction; they were also interviewed and asked to assess their relationship with God, with people, and their own spiritual practices in the past three months. I provided six sessions of guided group spiritual direction, which served as an intervention to assess whether group spiritual direction would impact or improve their relationships in the aforementioned areas. In each session, different forms of spiritual practices were introduced to the participants to help them engage with God, including meditation, silence, companioning, silence, and prayer. The pattern was repeated until each person had the opportunity to share his or her promptings.

This format differs from a traditional small group where conversations and discussions are more free-spirited. Group spiritual direction aims to cultivate spiritual intimacy between people and God through a discerning spiritual community. Outcomes of the research project showed that participants had greatly increased and deepened their experiences of God. They became more aware of God's presence in their everyday life. Furthermore, they found that group spiritual direction offered a safe environment in which they could share their inner life

journey, which resulted in a deeper self-awareness and a deeper spiritual connection with their group members. The members cherished the depths of connection and vulnerability they shared, especially in light of the Chinese culture of ‘saving face’ – the general avoidance of revealing any personal shame or struggle.

This outcome confirms the effectiveness of the spiritual practices prescribed in the spiritual model described in Chapter 3. Through practicing different spiritual exercises, we can deepen our relationship with God. Most importantly, the repetitive spaces of silence invited the participants to become more attuned to God’s voice. Moreover, it helped them practice discernment for both themselves and on behalf of others. Finally, their exposure to different centering exercises helped them realize the many different ways they could spend their quiet time with God, such as gospel contemplation and the daily examen. As a result, they developed a greater desire to spend time with God. This positive outcome can offer Chinese evangelical churches a new direction beyond the traditional discipleship programs that focus solely on equipping believers with theological and biblical knowledge. The outcome of the research project also affirms that engaging believers with different ancient spiritual practices can be valuable in deepening our intimacy with God and people, and can strengthen our commitment to our daily walk with God. It is my hope that this research portfolio will bring hope and inspiration to many Chinese evangelical churches in North

America who are struggling with spiritual vitality and that the body of Christ will experience the glory and beauty of daily missional living.

CHAPTER 2:
A SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The process of writing this autobiography has helped me trace God's activity in my life journey so far. It chronicles with my childhood and ends with my present ministry context. My reflections have helped me realize the need for authentic spiritual transformation of Christians, particularly in Chinese evangelical churches.

Early Childhood

For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.
(Psalm 139:13-14)

I grew up in a fishing village called JinJiang, a county-level city of Quanzhou, Fujian of China. It is a village surrounded by ocean on all three sides. It borders the Taiwan Strait of the South China Sea to the South. As a child, the seashore was my playroom. One memory I have is my sitting on a sandy beach picking seaweed. I was about four or five-years-old. The seaweed was not merely algae, in small pieces, but long and wide. I could wrap the seaweed around my body from head to toe. I remember there was a bucket by my side and my sister told me that we were not just collecting the seaweed for dinner, but people were

coming to collect it and pay us for it. Despite that I did not grow up in a Christian family, this was a taste of God's gracious provision during my childhood.

During this period, another playroom was my parents' working studio (it also functioned as a living room for entertaining guests). My parents were tailors and they made all my clothing. During the seventies, most people lived modestly; it was very common for households to make their own clothes for their children. Since my parents were tailors, this was even more the case. I recall sitting on the floor, playing with strips of fabric while my parents worked on a high table. I have a vivid image in my mind of them putting charcoals inside an iron for ironing.

Unlike my parents' home, my grandmother and uncle's place was on farmland where chicken and ducks roamed, which was typical of most households in the area. Grandmother used a particular tone to communicate with her chicks and I was amazed that all the chicks would instantly obey and gather for food. My grandmother could also tell when a chicken had laid an egg by a certain sound that it made. My grandmother also made me drink the raw egg because she believed there were nutrients in the egg when it was eaten while still hot and fresh.

Another fun activity during this early period was spending time with other kids who took me to the field to dig out peanuts and sweet yams. I remember vividly how the roots of the peanuts were all connected, like a bundle of

fireworks. The field we were digging in likely did not belong to us; we were just a bunch of mischievous kids doing it for fun.

Another unforgettable scene is staying at my grandmother's home drinking fresh milk. My grandmother always knew when the person was going to come to the village with his milking cow; she would immediately grab a metal mug for the owner to milk the cow. The milk was my breakfast. The danger of drinking unpasteurized milk was unknown to us back then; nonetheless, drinking milk fresh from a cow is a beautiful memory I have of my life in this simple village. Now, as an adult, every time I find myself at a farm with animals, I am transported back to the idyllic experiences of my childhood. It becomes a means for me to encounter God and be fascinated by His wondrous creation.

My Life in a New Land

As they pass through the Valley of Baka, they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.
(Psalm 84:614)

In 1973, my father left for Hong Kong to find a job, hoping to pursue a better life for the family. I was three-years-old, my older sister Julie was eight-years-old, and my younger sister, Jade, was yet to be born in about a month. A few years after my father left, my mother had also applied for immigration to Hong Kong. The application for the three of us was accepted in the year 1978; however, Jade had to be left behind with my grandmother (since she was too young to be taken care of when my mother had filed the application). Thus, in 1978, when I was about eight-years-old, my mother brought Julie and me to Hong

Kong to reunite with my father. It was not an easy transition, but my mother did it for the sake of the family. In China back then, everyone's dream was to go to Hong Kong in hopes of having a better life. Looking back, I do not recall my father ever going back home to visit the family in Fujian.

Being fatherless at such a young age made me grieve. Because my family needed to survive financially, it cost us the unity of our family. This painful experience in my childhood led me to cherish all the more being adopted into God's loving family. Having once been forsaken, I came to value God's unconditional love: "Though my father forsake me, the Lord will receive me" (Psalm 27:4).

In Hong Kong, we stayed at a relative's home where she rented out rooms. The rooms were very small; the three of us were packed in a room. I never asked why we could not stay with my father. It was likely because Hong Kong was such an expensive place to live that he could only afford to rent a room for himself. After merely weeks of living in our relative's home, we had to move again to a family friend's home, which was another tiny apartment. After a brief stay, we eventually rented our own place, which was in the same apartment building but in a different unit. We rented a small room of a two-bedroom apartment, which belonged to a Shanghai lady. I attended a school nearby. I began with grade one, but my classmates could hardly tell that I was older than many of them. At the school, I met other students whose situation was similar to my own—transitioning from life in China to Hong Kong.

On the first day of English class, the teacher wanted to know our level so she gave us a dictation on the alphabet and some vocabulary. I will never forget this: I received a zero because I had never learned English before. I had learned some Pinyin when I was in grade one in Fujian, but what the teacher required of us was totally different. A score of zero was shameful, and ‘losing face’ for a little girl learning to adjust to a new school, a new culture, and new people.

Many of these sorrowful experiences could have become too heavy for me to bear, yet God would be the miracle worker, turning water into wine, helping Peter throw the net into the sea which yielded an abundance of fish. From a life of despair, God would eventually show me contentment and joy in a life lived with Him, in which my worth would be determined by Christ’s work on the Cross and not by the measure of man.

While I had the privilege of going to school, my mother and sister had to work in a factory. As a result, I was assigned the responsibility of preparing meals, which my mother coached me on. She gave me a budget of around 10 HKD (the average monthly salary for a household back then was around 1000-1500 HKD). I cooked tofu, sprout, and fish balls. This period of learning how to cook paved a wonderful path for my future when I would become a pastor and extend hospitality to others.

Moving to Our Own Apartment

After a year of renting a room from the landlady when I was nine, we eventually moved to a larger place, a two-story apartment. The three of us occupied the ground floor, a unit next to the elevators. This time, however, *we* were the landlords. We sublet two rooms on the lower level while we inhabited the upper level. One of our tenants was a very nice Shanghainese couple. The wife was a gentle lady with a unique name. The husband was an artist who painted all day long. He was a commercial artist that painted the scenes of Paris. He painted countless copies of the same artwork and submitted them to agents who then sold them overseas. Now, whenever I am in an art store and I see paintings of Parisian scenes, I recall this artist. However, having grown up witnessing the monotony of mass reproductions of Paris scenes, they no longer appeal to me since they seem to lack originality. Since a young age, God seemed to have planted in me a desire for authenticity, beauty, and originality. I believe all these thoughts were glimpses of the thirst for God in my soul. As Mark Galli, the author of *Beautiful Orthodoxy*, states: “Christians believe that our longing for the good, the true and the beautiful finds its completion in Jesus Christ—the Way the Truth, and the Life” (Galli 2017, 36).

We converted the large living room of the apartment into a bedroom for rent. This configuration blocked the natural light coming from the windows. As a child I was scared to go downstairs because it was so dark, so I tried to imagine fairies dancing in the room. Even then I had some notion that there existed an

unseen spiritual world. One of the rooms in the upper level was locked, with no occupants, which led me to develop the crazy idea that there were frightening beasts or spirits residing there in the darkness. As a child, I had this sense that evil spirits were present and I feared their unconquerable powers. In retrospect, I see the humor of God since this room eventually became my sister's and my bedroom, a place where my sister would lead me to Christ. God has the power to reverse the dark rooms in our lives, reclaiming them for His purposes, to be filled with His light!

Memories of My Father

One day my mother told me that my father was never going to live with us. He said that he had grown so used to living by himself that he wanted to continue doing so. From then on, we were on our own. My reaction to the news was not a drastic one: I had already not seen my father for five years, so we already had no emotional connection.

Since our arrival to Hong Kong, I had only seen my father a few times. One of my best memories is my father bringing me a toy—a magic board. It was a drawing board that I could write on, and I could move a tab to erase it. The novelty of this toy would have been equivalent to today's iPad, though the technology, of course, is incomparable. Until my father's gift to me, I had never owned a toy like that before. The magic board became a treasured possession.

Another encounter I had with my father is a sad one. Once, when I had finished eating a banana, I was about to throw the banana peel out the window until my father stopped me by threatening to hit me if I did so. I was not aware that this was not the right thing to do, and I was hurt by my father's harsh reaction. I could not understand what was wrong since all I could see when I gazed down from the window was the garage deck. My father and I had few exchanges in my childhood, so the memory of his angry expression on this occasion has stayed with me. Although this was a sad interaction, my disciplinary experience of an authoritative figure was almost limited to this episode.

It was not until my classmate in my primary school asked me what my father did for a living that I realized how affected I was emotionally by his deserting my mother, sister, and me. I started making up stories about him to my classmates. I was too young to know what to do with my sadness. At night, I wept and pitied myself for not having a father when everyone else had one.

First Invitation to Know Jesus

In grade six, Cecilia started going to church. One day, she asked her friend Lau Kwok On to talk to me on the phone while she was in my home. Kwok-On tried to invite me to attend his church's youth fellowship, but I told him that there was no point. Since the church had so many people, I reasoned, it did not matter whether it had one more or one less a member. I had totally missed the point of his invitation. Nonetheless, this was God's official invitation for me to get to

know His love. And deep down in my soul, I needed this love. I was in a barren land, lonely without my father and coping with the many challenges of adapting to a new land.

Since the time I received a score of “0” on my first English test, I learned to work hard in learning the language without any adult assistance. Finally, in grade six, I was proud to receive a perfect score on my English exam. The result was posted on the bulletin board at the back of the classroom. Glowing from my sense of victory, I stood there admiring my examination paper, which had been posted for public viewing. My heart sunk when I noticed that I had made an error that was not caught by the teacher. However, I did not want this academic accomplishment to be taken away from me, so I kept the discovery to myself. The guilt I felt over my dishonesty stayed with me because I was aware that God knew about my secret. I believe that He was using this incident to remind me of my own sinfulness. Wanting badly to appear perfect in so many aspects of my life, I would soon learn that I could fool people externally, but I could never hide my secret sins from a holy God!

When my sister was about 18-years-old, she began working for a photo finishing company. She was very pretty and many young men tried to court her. Next to the store where my sister worked was a piano and music store owned by a man who liked my sister a lot, and so he tried to be friendly with me to get closer to my sister. When he realized that I did not have an English name, he suggested “Pamela” for my name. I almost took his suggestion, but later decided not to.

Then one day, while reading a novel for my English class, I came across the name *Paddy*. I had always wanted to pick a name that started with the letter “P” since my Chinese name is Ping-Ping. I also did not want a common name. It was not until university that I found out that my name is Irish (an alternative name for *Patrick*). Curious, my linguistic professor had asked me, “You are Chinese, why do you have an Irish name?” I replied, “Okay, I am Irish then!”

During a family trip to Ireland and Scotland, I seem to have found my spiritual home in Celtic Spirituality. Upon my arrival to Ireland, the immigration officer asked me, “Do you know anyone in Ireland?” I answered, “St. Patrick.” Unexpectedly, she laughed. I added, “You can tell by my name.” This made her laugh even more. My quest for authentic spirituality dates back to 2008 when I signed up for the Spiritual Direction program at Tyndale. Since then, my heart has aligned with the principles and practices of Celtic Spirituality taught by Ray Simpson: monastic practices, contemplation and action, hospitality, soul friends, God seen in creation, a deep love for Scripture, and the Kairos components in understanding time (Simpson 2004). All those approaches of Celtic spirituality have not only been life-giving but also thirst-quenching in my soul’s deepest desire for building intimacy with God. They complement my familiar intellectual approach to spiritual formation.

Secondary School & My Conversion: Encountering Gifts of Beauty

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:
The old has gone, the new is here! (2 Cor.5:17)

In 1984, I attended Rosaryhill Secondary School. It was located at Stubbs Road, a ridge that is slightly lower than the Peak. The Peak is a popular tourist attraction which offers a panoramic view of Hong Kong. The school was a large and beautiful Catholic school founded by Dominican priests in 1959. Josephine was one of my closest friends from junior high. Together we attended a Faith class, an afterschool program that helped us explore the Catholic faith. A teacher sat in a chair and explained Catholicism to us, but the class was not very interesting, and I recall little from the class. Nonetheless, the class represented my first step in faith exploration.

I often hung out with my girlfriends after school, one of them being Josephine. As young girls, we talked about our superstitions and were curious about spirits. A popular game during this time was one that involved 'spirits'. We would draw a circle by tracing a coin and write inside the circle potential answers for the spirit to respond to, such as 'Yes' and 'No'. Then we would invite the 'spirit' of one of the deceased to appear on the coin. We sought the spirit's guidance by asking all sorts of questions. After a minute, the coin we were touching lightly with our fingers mystically began moving to particular answers we had written down on the sheet of paper. It was a frightening experience. I thank God that I did not go too deep into experimenting with the spirits.

My Conversion

During junior high, my sister Julie was attending high school at night. The teacher who taught her Chinese class was a devoted Christian, and she occasionally used the Psalms from the Bible as part of her teaching content. This was how my sister became interested in Christianity. The teacher was enthusiastic about sharing her Christian testimony with Julie. Not too long after, praying at home, Julie accepted Christ by inviting Jesus to be the Lord of her life. I witnessed the transformation of Julie's life—she was full of joy, like a light from above had brightened her life and made her shine.

One day, following her conversion, Julie shared with me that we have a Heavenly Father who loves me so much that He sent Jesus Christ to die for my sins. There, in our bedroom (the dark room I used to fear), Julie told me that I could invite Christ to be the Lord of my life. I trusted Julie's words because I had personally witnessed the transformation that had taken place in her life. In simple faith, I, too, accepted Jesus to be my Lord and Savior. My conversion happened when I was in grade nine (which is Form 3 according to the British education system in Hong Kong). Afterward, my sister started bringing me to the church's youth fellowship at Chau Wan Gospel Church, the same church her Chinese instructor attended. My first experience of God's love was through the love shown to me by the people in this church. Once, when the church held a picnic on a Saturday afternoon, a lady from the church noticed that I was not comfortable sitting on the ground without a cover, so she passed her cover to me. I was so

touched by this act of kindness—a divine love made real through a person who was not even aware of my first experience of God’s presence in my life. My first year of Christian living, however, included many challenges. My mother did not like the idea of Julie and me attending church. Every time my sister came home from church, she and my mother got into a heated argument. As a result, after only a few times of going to church, I stopped myself because I did not want to upset my mother. Yet, God’s work continued even though my church activities paused.

My First One-to-One Discipleship Experience

When I was in Form 4, my mother had moved out to oversee her business of running the inn. Her absence meant that she could not prevent Julie and me from being involved at church, so I began going to church more regularly. A fellow sister from church, who was in college, helped me go through ‘the new Christian’s faith journey’ in eight lessons. It covered basic topics like prayer, reading the Bible, tithing, serving, and fellowshiping. I very much enjoyed this one-to-one discipleship time, and I believe this experience was fundamental in laying a solid foundation for my faith journey.

Meanwhile, Julie was very active at church, attending fervently in many of the programs. Besides Sunday worship, Sunday school and fellowships, she attended the weekly Wednesday night corporate prayer meeting which I attended along with her. Every prayer meeting, we would fast and eat only a light meal

after the meeting was finished. I do not remember whether everyone else was fasting or this was only done by my sister and me. The pastors were teaching us about the discipline of fasting and encouraging us to practice it, and my sister was very willing to do whatever it took to express her faith in Christ. Thus, fasting is one of the disciplines I have come to practice most frequently, and my sister has definitely been one of the most significant figures who helped me to grow in my Christian faith early on in my spiritual journey.

During this high school period, the church pastors often organized groups to share the gospel in our community. After Sunday service, we would knock on doors in the neighbourhood. As a result of this practice, gradually in my own life, I became very enthusiastic about inviting people to my fellowship. I tried to invite almost everyone who was close to me to attend Daniel Fellowship, a youth group for high school students. Once, I invited Peter, Stephen and Addy and they all attended; since the three of them were best friends, it would be easy to have the three of them come if I could successfully invite one. Stephen was the one with whom I had many academic and religious discussions. He was nice and smart. He sat in front of me when we were in Form 4. Peter was a devoted Catholic. He and Anna were the class leaders, responsible for overseeing the class and reporting details to the teacher. Although Andy and Stephen did not become Christian, I nonetheless treasured our many moments of heart-to-heart talks about Christianity, and even our hot debates! Looking back at these stories, I see that God had been training me to be a young evangelist. Inviting people to church and

sharing the gospel with them shaped me and deepened my knowledge of apologetics because of the challenging questions and discussions that came up when I spoke with them.

However, there was a time at youth fellowship when a sister, who had accepted Christ much longer than I had, shared about her struggles. She confessed that during the weekdays while she worked, she did not feel like she was a Christian. She only felt a sense of being a Christian when she went to fellowship and attended church programs. Her sharing bewildered me. On the one hand, I could not dispute her feelings; on the other hand, I felt that this should not be the experience of a Christian. Unfortunately, I did not have an explanation for her back then, for I had only been a Christian for two years. I believe this sister's sense of disconnection from God was not unique, but a reality for many Christians. The church was not keen on guiding individuals in how to experience God in daily life. In retrospect, it seems like the activities at the church (no matter what learning platform, form of service, or mission work) were the prime focus of most Chinese evangelical Christians. They were not very good at teaching members how to be engaged with God through the spiritual disciplines.

Finding Beauty in People and Music

Rosamond, my highschool friend, and I were very close. Together we laughed often about the small stuff, seeing the humor in things that other people did not see. Rosamond was a gentle and kindhearted person. She was a pretty girl,

though she was born with a noticeable red mark on her face; despite this, she was never self-conscious about it and remained a cheerful person. Her mother was also very pretty, but even more memorable was her mother's inner beauty. Once after school, a few of my classmates came over to my home and Rosamond's mother brought over some snacks for us. I especially loved her vegetarian chicken chunk and I devoured it all. When she saw that there was nothing left, Rosamond told her that it was I who had consumed most of the snacks. A few days later, her mother brought over another batch of snacks for me. I was so touched by her kindness and generosity.

Although Rosamond was raised in quite a well-off family, she was a humble and faithful friend. She was so talented in piano. She introduced me to classical music. When we hung out at her house, she often played classical pieces that she had mastered. She also played to me some of her father's CDs, and I was amazed by the sound quality since most people back then were still listening to the traditional black disc. It was partly due to Rosamond's influence that I became so fond of classical music, and I enjoy listening to it to this day.

Whenever I listen to a beautiful piece of classical music, it is a moment that sanctifies my soul. I believe that God has endowed individuals with the gift of music so that others can discover this beauty and come to recognize God as the ultimate Gift Giver. Encountering such beauty so touches our soul that it enables us to search for and connect with God. Later in my life, I learned that many wonderful pieces I enjoyed listening were actually composed by Christian

composers, such as J.S. Bach and Mozart. It is indeed a moment of spiritual formation through the gift of music. Mark Galli, the author of *Beautiful Orthodoxy*, suggests that Christians should be people who “practice making life beautiful” (Galli 2017, 38). This includes encouraging believers who are gifted creatively to paint, sculpt, design, and compose music. He said, “It is not an accident that the Middle Ages and Renaissance, when Europe was predominantly Christian, produced many of the great works of art and architecture that are still creating a sense of awe today” (Galli 2017, 38-39). My encounter with such beauty in my life is truly a gift from God, and it inspires me to thirst for the true source of this beauty: my Creator, my God, and the lover of my soul.

A Broken Dream of Attending College in Ohio, America

Almost six months before I graduated from high school, I applied to attend a college in Ohio. Peter’s sister was a professor of dance at the University of Ohio, and she helped me by choosing a good college to attend as well as offering me a place to stay if I ever studied there. In a matter of months, I was thrilled to receive an offer of acceptance. The last step in the process was to apply for a visa from the U.S. Consulate.

While applying for my student visa, I had to show the U.S. Consulate my family’s income tax files. Although my mother and sister were making good income for the family, the files did not demonstrate strong evidence that our family income was stable, even after I proved that we owned several pieces of

property. I believe that what later took place was not a result of my financial standing but that a single lady was often suspected of having another motive for going to America—for marriage. The day I opened the letter and discovered that my application for a student visa had been rejected, my heart sunk. My dream of studying abroad was broken. It was even more difficult to bear as I watched a few of my friends preparing to depart for another country while I was left behind. I felt lost, not knowing what my next step would be.

This rejection was one of the most devastating experiences of my life. When my pastor heard the news, he comforted me and prayed with me. With a downcast spirit, I prayed to God for guidance. I received a lot of support from my fellowship members, but I was still very discouraged. Deep down in my heart, I was angry at God. This anger was like smoke clouding my mind, unable to clear. During this period, my pastor gave me a card that offered tremendous comfort; in it he quoted from a book: “If God takes away what is so precious to you, it is because He wants to give you something better.” While I understood what the quote meant, at the time, I could not fully internalize it as I still felt overwhelmed by the feeling of disappointment of a dashed dream. I had yet to learn how to lament for my loss.

During this period, my friend Anna had already departed for Toronto. When she learned that my application for a student visa to the U.S. had been rejected, she encouraged me to apply to a school she was attending in Toronto. At

this point, I was not sure of what I should do: I was still in the process of discovering what path I should take.

An Unplanned Sabbatical: A New Chapter of Learning

After discussing the matter with my mother and sister, we decided to proceed with my application to study in Canada. Upon submitting my application to a Christian school in Toronto, I felt at peace. I gradually learned to put my faith in God rather than focusing on the circumstances. Meanwhile, there was still a year before I would hear news from Canada and I had to decide how I would spend that time.

I considered studying in Germany in case my application was rejected. I was told that Germany was known for Hotel Management. I decided to enroll in a German class at the Germany Cultural Centre in Central, Hong Kong. German was a difficult language to learn, but my teacher was very patient in teaching us; she instructed us on how to use our throat to ‘gargle’ in order to pronounce German words correctly. It was a very interesting learning experience.

This waiting period turned out to be a wonderful opportunity for me to dive into projects and activities that I had always wanted to do. My sister had discovered years ago that I loved taking photos, so that year she bought me my first manual camera, a Minolta 700. I was so excited; I started asking my classmates to teach me about exposure and aperture. This period was also a chance for me to explore my fascination with Astronomy. After once having

visited the Hong Kong Space Museum, I grew extremely curious about the mysteries of space. Upon hearing about a club at the Space Museum that offered courses on Astrophotography, I jumped at the chance to participate in it since it combined both my interests into one. However, my entry-level camera did not have the proper zoom lens required by the Astrophotography course. When I shared my predicament with my jazz teacher Roger, he said he recently bought a Minolta 7000 (a high-end camera in that era) and was willing to loan it to me. I handled his camera with extra caution. I was so moved by his generosity and very grateful to God for providing for all my needs. Losing the chance to study in the U.S. led to an unexpected learning opportunity that I took advantage of when my family could support me financially in all these interesting courses. My experience of God's provision helped to strengthen my faith in Him.

Aspiring to become a *'Renaissance Woman'*

Growing up, I never developed the habit of watching soap operas or reading romances like most of my friends did. Whenever my sisters watched television, they would become so engaged with the show, but I was not as interested in television as they were. I dabbled in some romance novels that were popular among my peers, but I never grew too fond of the stories. I discovered that my interests lay in a whole different area. I started to read books on existentialism and platonic philosophy. Many of the existentialists were atheists, and their views were very negative. Some viewed life as meaningless, such as the

famous claim that “God is Dead” by Friedrich Nietzsche. Even as a young believer, I had always contemplated the meaning and purpose of life. I always wanted to better understand the reason for my existence. The year off gave me a chance to delve deeper into this literature. The idea of platonic love fascinates me. It depicts the idea of non-sexual love and paints the image of ultimate purity. I was also deeply drawn to the idea of a utopia, which depicts a perfect and idealistic world. Synonyms of utopia include idealistic, visionary, romantic, fanciful, and unrealistic; quite often, I heard people using these words to describe my character. I was grateful that the desire of my heart was rooted in knowing the beauty of Christ.

In the same period, I was also going out a lot with friends and trying different activities. My mother told me that she wished I would stay home more often; she said that whenever I went out, her heart went along with me. It was then that I suggested that I learn piano: if she bought me a piano, I could take piano lessons, and I would stay home more often to practice. And that is what my mom did (although, I admit, I still wound up going out often to meet my friends).

Besides taking piano lessons, I also completed Level 5 of Music Theory within a short time. Suddenly, I found myself so eager to try out new interests, which I never had the chance to do as a child. I felt like Alice in Wonderland, drawn to all these fascinating scenes that came upon my path. Shortly after completing music theory, I took up another instrument—the Guzheng (古筝)—a

string instrument that resembled a harp, except it is horizontal. The sound of the strings is so beautiful I felt its power claim my restless soul and bring tranquility.

As I reflect back on that year of rest and adventure, I realize that many children are more likely to feel that their parents are forcing them to learn something and are very often learning the subject reluctantly. This had not been the case for me. My mom, my sisters, and I were busy working hard to survive our limited circumstances. Thus, when we were no longer living in survival mode, I strongly felt the exhilaration and freedom to learn, and my mother, knowing how hard it had been for us, became very supportive of whatever I desired to do.

The unexpected year had turned out to be a tremendously liberating one. I dreamt of becoming the *Renaissance woman* that I read about—clever and well-versed at many different things. The year enabled me to equip myself with the joys of my heart, and it paved a good foundation for me to connect with people through whatever hobbies they had. It taught me about relationship-building, which would be instrumental later on in pastoral ministry when I sought to connect with people and bring them to Christ.

Studying in Toronto

"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts."

(Psalm 55:9 14)

After a year of freely being able to engage in everything I loved to learn, I finally received an acceptance letter to a high school in Toronto, and my application for a student visa was also approved. I arrived in Toronto on August

23, 1990. I rented the room of a house owned by a Chinese family; it was the same house where my friend Anna had lived in her last year of high school. I was excited to discover how spacious the houses were in Canada. Although my home in Hong Kong was considered very roomy, it was nothing in comparison to this house in Scarborough that was about 3000 square feet. During the first week of my arrival, Anna and her boyfriend Ben took me to Quebec City. Even though I was still jet lagged, I was eager to go. They picked me up at three in the morning, and we arrived in Quebec City at around eleven in the morning. This was my first tour of the city and I felt like Alice in Wonderland again. I was exhilarated to experience the new environment, including the culture, art, and food. Growing up as a youth, I had always dreamed about being surrounded by green pastures, castles, art, and classical music. The exotic atmosphere of Quebec City ignited my passion for the arts, including the architecture of Château Frontenac, the romantic music played by musicians on the streets at night, and the beautiful artwork on display portraying the city. Having been confined to Chinese culture all my life, every one of these experiences felt freeing. This trip was my first real Canadian experience, and it gave me a taste of French culture.

An Unforgettable Experience of Hospitality

During my first month of participating in the youth fellowship at the first church I attended in Canada, which mainly comprised high school and university visa students from Hong Kong, I met an amazing lady who later became my

mentor. During one fellowship meeting, we had a guest speaker named Lena Lau who had taught linguistics at Hong Kong University and was a new immigrant to Toronto. Lena shared about missionaries going to Africa, patiently learning the dialect of the tribes, and translating the Bible for the Africans. As a young Christian, I rarely heard stories about missionaries. I was genuinely moved by her account and pursued further dialogue with her after her talk. Upon discovering that I was a visa student, she quickly understood that this meant I did not have a caring family to nurture me with good meals, so she invited me to her home for a meal and also arranged for me to get a ride home. She showed me around her house. I was fascinated by her antique-style piano and her many plants, including her African Violets. After the tour of her home, she prepared some steamed Shanghainese dumplings, cold cut turkey, and watermelon. I was so touched by Lena's hospitality. After an enjoyable evening, a Christian brother (who was studying Forestry at the University of Guelph) volunteered to give me a ride home. I was so excited that I stayed up late writing about the experience in my journal as well as in a lengthy letter to my mother.

A few years later, I came across an article published in an Ambassador for Christ (AFC) magazine, which was written by Lena Lau. I was thrilled to see this because she had been such an influential figure to me. At that moment, I felt regret for never having asked for her contact information. I bravely made a phone call to AFC and explained to the person how I was acquainted with her, and the person kindly gave Lena's contact to me. After so many years, Lena still

remembered me and we had a long talk over the phone updating each other about recent events happening in our lives. She invited me again to her home for lunch. In the following years, we continued to meet, discussing gardening, our church life, and my Christian journey of ups and downs. I looked up to Lena; she became a spiritual mentor to me. She was able to offer me an insightful perspective on the challenges faced by the Christian. Being a popular speaker who regularly spoke on how to study the Word of God, Lena helped me as a new believer to develop a deeper understanding of Scripture.

God's love and grace were so evident during these years. I can see that He had been using different people to guide me through the different stages of my life. As a child, I had felt an overwhelming sense of self-pity because I felt that my father had abandoned my family. However, God, as my Heavenly Father, graciously sent many people into my life to show me kindness and mercy.

Campus Romance

In 1991, was admitted to York University. Shortly after my first year in university, I joined the Chinese Christian Fellowship (CCF) on campus. I was also invited to join the gospel team and I was paired up with a partner. We spent two hours weekly going around campus sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with the Chinese students. The CCF office was not only a place where we met our partner to pray before going out as a team to share the gospel, but it was also a hub where people chatted and shared class notes, textbooks, and profiles of the professors.

One day, when I entered the CCF office, I saw a new person who was teaching a lady accounting. He introduced himself as Alfred Wong. When I told him my name, he was surprised to find out that Paddy was actually a female.

During the second term of my first year, I joined the Chinese newspaper association. I was responsible for recruiting people to write articles for the newspaper. One day, while I was chatting with Anthony, my gospel partner, I asked him if he knew anyone from CCF who liked to write. He mentioned a Christian brother named Alfred. I asked him whether he was talking about the Alfred who did not attend church, and Anthony confirmed that it was he. Alfred promised to write an article for the newspaper. We talked on the phone from time to time. The more I learned about him, the more I admired him. We could converse about anything, from classical music to astronomy. He visited me after a few weeks, and I showed him around the place where I lived. In the family room was my secondhand piano, and I played a few of my favorite pieces for him. Occasionally, we took the same bus home since we only lived a block apart from each other in Scarborough.

After the completion of my exams in mid-April, Alfred invited me to join three of his friends on a trip to North Bay. Alfred had spent a year and a half of his high school life there. Not only was the trip an opportunity to get to know his friends, Wallace, Robert, and Samantha, but it was also an excellent opportunity for me to get to know Alfred better in a social setting and observe how he

interacted with his friends. During the trip I discovered that Alfred was a humble, caring, and selfless person, always looking after the comfort of others.

Upon our return to Toronto, we were scheduled to attend a CCF retreat the next day. An incident that I can never forget was when I found out that I was supposed to bring my own sleeping bag to the retreat. Finding out that I did not have one, Alfred let me use his. The retreat took place at the end of April when it was still cold in the mornings. Alfred, without his sleeping bag, awoke every morning feeling chilly and only had his coat to keep himself warm. I felt so grateful for his sacrifice.

On the fourth of July, Alfred took me to watch the musical *Les Misérables*. We ate at an elegant and classy restaurant called Honest Ed's. Sadly, it closed down many years ago. There was a small section in the restaurant that was like a small museum, containing collectible items belonging to Mr. Ed Mirvish, the owner of the restaurant. After we had been seated, Alfred excused himself for a short while; he returned presenting me with a bouquet of roses. I was surprised by his formality. He later gave me a small heart-shaped tin box; on the lid were the words, "*You Light up My Life*." Initially, I thought it was a jewel and wondered whether he was proposing. It was too early in our relationship for him to do this. When I opened the box and saw a candle, I was relieved. I assumed he had given me a candle to create a more romantic atmosphere. When I was about to light it up, Alfred asked me whether I was certain I wanted to light it up. Then he expressed his feelings for me. He spoke in English, sharing that he had kept the

tin box for a long time and had planned on presenting it one day to the girl he loved. I was so touched by his thoughtfulness and sincerity. His actions and words showed that he took love very seriously. I lit the candle, which symbolized my acceptance of his love. Then he held my hand and prayed as we expressed our commitment to one another.

I was very grateful that the Lord had prepared a person for me who loved me so wholeheartedly. Alfred was officially my first boyfriend. I had never loved anyone the way I loved Alfred. With Alfred, his love for me was so selfless and unconditional, it was like a reflection of God's love.

**Plunging into an Abyss:
Coping with Unbearable Pain and Loss**

“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”
The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.
But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.
(1 Cor. 15:55-57)

My mother and I had a natural bond, although, while growing up, I had always felt that my mother loved Julie more than she loved me. Very often, my mother would cook a nourishing meal consisting of chicken and ginseng in a steaming ceramic pot and only give it to Julie. When Julie entered adulthood, however, more conflicts began to emerge between Julie and my mother. I later realized that my mother may have shown favoritism toward Julie because she felt indebted to her, having made her oldest daughter start working so early. Julie did not have the opportunity to go to regular day school like me. At the same time, Jade had been separated from my mother for almost five years, having been left

behind under the care of my grandmother when the rest of the family was in Hong Kong. I realized that I was the most blessed one since I was able to stay with my mother for the most time.

My mother was an affectionate person. Sometimes, when she was holding my hand, she would squeeze it, attempting to be playful with me. Sometimes, when we were watching TV together, she would stretch out one of her hands so that I might playfully take a “bite” of her palm (though she knew that I would never do it). My mother often had headaches; most likely she had inherited it from my grandmother. I was often the person who massaged my mother’s pressure points to reduce the pain she was feeling. I, too, have experienced headaches since I was a child, and I later learned that some of these severe headaches were actually migraines.

My mother moving to Hong Kong not only meant that she had to adapt to a new environment, but it also meant that she was going to be a single parent when she was only in her early thirties. Later on, she met a man and they started living together. She told me very little about the relationship. I knew that the man used to be an interior designer for a hotel for many years, but he quit his job to manage the inn with my mother. At one point, my mother and her boyfriend, Simon, owned three different units of the inn in Causeway Bay.

One day in the summer, my mother came to the place where my sister and I lived. She said she did not feel safe living in her own home. I do not recall what was happening between her and her boyfriend at the time. I know that she had the

intention of leaving him, and he was fearful about her plan and might have threatened her. However, after a few weeks, my mother went back, likely because she had to look after her business and was compelled to resolve the issue with him. To this day, I still do not know the full story!

An Unbearable Loss: The Death of My Mother

After spending an entire summer in Hong Kong, I went back to Toronto to continue the third year of my Mass Communication and Psychology program. I will never forget what happened on the evening of December 12, 1993. I came home to discover that my sister Julie had left me a message: “Ping-Ping, something has happened in our home; please call me when you receive this message.” I finished my rice noodle before returning Julie’s call, sensing that something terrible had happened. Julie informed me that a fire had erupted at the inn where my mother lived. My mother had died in her bedroom, along with Simon (pseudonym). Her bedroom door was locked and she was not able to open it to escape from the fire.

Upon hearing this unbelievable news, I felt like the entire world had collapsed before me. Heartbroken and traumatized, I could not fathom how to continue living without my mother. After hanging up the phone, I started crying so loudly that my roommate Jenna came in to check on me. When I told her what had happened, she comforted me! But everything around me had become so dark,

like when Jesus was crucified on the cross. There was nothing on earth that could heal a heart that was so broken unless the Lord Himself provided a miracle.

God Provides Comfort to My Soul

When Alfred found out about the news, he immediately came over to keep me company. The next day, I went on campus to ask for permission to postpone the writing of all my examinations, and then I departed for Hong Kong.

The police reported that Simon had intentionally set the bedroom on fire. It was a murder-suicide: the lock on the bedroom door was deliberately tampered with so that it could not be opened from the inside. Julie told me that when Mother's body was found, she had been on her knees, in a posture of prayer. The police asked me whether I wanted to see my mother one last time. Jade advised me not to so that I could preserve in my mind a good image of Mother. I agreed, not only because I wanted to have a good memory of her, but also because I did not have the courage to face the reality of the pain my mother endured in the fire. The funeral service went smoothly. I was unusually calm: I did not even cry. I do not know whether I had handled the grieving process well.

There were a few aspects that brought me great comfort. After I returned to Toronto on January 1, 1994, I was scheduled to write my examinations. God showed His love to me through several angels. Alfred brought me the greatest comfort. He was naturally sensitive, compassionate, and caring, and the love he showed me helped me cope with the tremendous pain I was feeling. The church

also played a significant role in offering me support. In particular, a family, the Leung's, prepared meals for me for almost two weeks, which allowed me to focus solely on studying for my make-up exams.

The greatest consolation was my mother's acceptance of Jesus Christ. A couple of years before she died, I had invited her to an evangelistic event. The event included the presentation of Christian testimonies by important figures in the community, including police officers, movie stars, and even former gang members. All the testimonies were so powerful. I was disappointed when my mother did not accept Jesus Christ at the event. It looked like something was holding her back.

My mother eventually accepted Christ on July 1, 1992. The pivotal moment was prompted by the difficult circumstances she was facing. Julie was to give birth to my eldest niece Deborah, but she was experiencing an ectopic pregnancy, a complication that takes place when the embryo attaches outside of the uterus. It was a rare condition that put my sister and the fetus's life in danger. During a critical moment in Julie's pregnancy, our church pastor came to visit and pray for my sister. My mother was present and was seeking divine strength and help for my sister; she said that she would be willing to accept Christ if God were to protect and heal her daughter. In her moment of desperation, with the help of our pastor, she accepted Jesus Christ to be her Savior. In Julie's time of crisis, the Lord used the situation to bring my mother to Christ. I was thankful that not only

were Julie and the baby safe, but my mother was forced to be in a situation where she could not rely on her own ability to save herself.

My mother was a risk-taker. She was creative and ambitious, coming up with business ideas and dedicated to success. Her entrepreneurial spirit had brought her from being a single mother who sewed in a factory to one who owned a fabric store, traded silk in Taiwan, and managed two inns and two residential apartments. At the same time, she was dedicated to raising me and building me up. She always complimented me in front of her friends regarding how I learned to manage the household at a very young age and how well I organized and cleaned our apartment while she was out grocery shopping.

However, my mother could also be naïve, determined, impulsive, imprudent, and undisciplined—weaknesses that no doubt led to her becoming involved in a risky relationship that eventually jeopardized her safety. Her three daughters inherited many of her personality traits. We are all risk-takers, entrepreneurs, and natural at negotiation; in addition, we can be spontaneous, undisciplined at times, and creative. My mother had a tremendous influence on us, and we credit her for our accomplishments. However, we also have to be mindful of the character weakness that we inherited from her as they could get us into difficult circumstances and hinder our spiritual growth.

My mother's death signaled a new season in my life as I embarked on a new career path, with new responsibilities and goals. My original plan before my mother's death was that after graduation I would go back to Hong Kong to take

care of my mother and use my first month's salary to buy her a diamond ring. But these plans perished when she died. During this period, I was feeling called to serve God wholeheartedly. My mother's death played a big role in my decision-making. Before her death, I hesitated about whether to respond to my call to ministry because my mother would not have supported my decision. Also, I had a desire to return to Hong Kong to look after her, even though I had no idea how this would impact my relationship with Alfred. Her death granted me the liberty to make some significant choices for my future.

Losing my mother still felt unreal to me, especially since I had just spent four months with her, and then three months later, just like that, she was gone. In retrospect, I was grateful that the Lord had guided me to return home and spend so much time with her the summer before she passed away. It was as if He had provided me an opportunity to bid her a final farewell. Following her death, from time to time, I would see my mother in my dreams. One vivid dream was my seeing her diving slowly into a peaceful and colourful ocean. As she was going deeper and deeper, I was attempting to go after her so that I could talk to her, but I could not. I interpreted the dream to mean that I had some unfinished business with her, or that I still needed closure regarding her death. Perhaps this dream was a reflection of the grudge I held for the man who set my mother's apartment on fire and was responsible for murdering her. Since both of them perished in the fire, I would never know the explanation for his actions. So many emotions were surging inside of me and I struggled to find a way to resolve them. Already

abandoned by my father at a young age, I felt the sense of abandonment intensify with the death of my mother.

Upon the loss of his wife, C.S. Lewis expressed his pain: “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing” (C.S. Lewis, 2013, 1). It was hard, if not impossible, to heal from this loss, even when there was Scripture to console me. The agony was overwhelming. C. S Lewis depicts it well: “Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything.” The psalm that became a consolation only came later in my Christian journey: “Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me. Teach me your way, Lord; lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors (Psalm 27:10-11).

In my last year of university, I took two elective courses to fulfill the requirements of my double major program. Most people chose easy courses that promised good grades; I chose courses that interested me, namely, photography and painting. Taking courses that I enjoyed helped to balance my heavy workload since I had to complete a thesis for my psychology program. Thus, my final year was bittersweet. While mourning over my mother’s death, I was able to spend numerous hours at my favorite library, share the gospel with students on campus, and enjoy relaxing breaks with a coffee and banana muffin with two of my closest friends Bunny and Tammy. My four years of campus life were eventful indeed, but it was my mother’s death that most significantly left a mark. In retrospect, I

learned that this was the point when I was invited to follow the leading of God, a lesson of faith. The experience of my mother's death became a catalyst for my spiritual growth because I had to taste the fierce realities of life. I was led to trust God as my navigator and intimate friend whom I could walk with and seek daily. Meanwhile, Alfred's self-less love and companionship, along with many faithful Christian friends around me become the outward manifestation of God's love.

My Seminary Years: Lessons and Mentors

Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ,
you do not have many fathers,
for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.
(1. Cor. 4:15)

As my graduation date was approaching, I struggled to decide whether I should find a job or apply for seminary. I made a few attempts to apply for jobs in the media field but got no response. My pastor Rev. Barclay Chong made a compelling statement to encourage me to take the seminary path: it is so precious to serve the Lord, he said, so the earlier we do it, the better. Rev. Chong had become a pastor when he was only nineteen-years-old; thus, he was speaking from experience. For the past two decades, Rev. Chong has been a significant mentor to me, greatly impacting my philosophy of ministry and way of serving the Lord. I followed his recommendation and applied to study at the Ontario Theology Seminary (presently Tyndale University College Seminary). In the year 1995 when I was accepted, the seminary was facing a financial crisis and there was uncertainty about whether the seminary would continue to operate. By the

grace of God, the seminary was sustained, so I was able to smoothly continue my studies.

Coming from a broken family, I had personally experienced how God had the power to restore me. I also recalled my fasting and prayer time during the East Canada Chinese Christian Youth Winter Conference in 1994. I had a vision of seeing broken marriages and families restored by God's love and His salvation. As a result, I felt that the Counseling program rightly reflected my passion. It turned out that the courses in the program offered great insight not only for my future ministry but also for my own personal growth.

One of the major assignments during the first year of the counseling program was to study our family of origin. In the past, whenever my grandmother shared her personal stories, I was never interested in or patient enough to listen to them. However, this time, while doing research on my family of origin, it was different. Never had I been so intentional in listening to my grandmother's stories about my family—whether it was about my parents, grandparents, or even great-grandparents.

One family secret that I discovered during my research was that my dad had been adopted. He was treated very badly by his parents and siblings. Even when he was older, he still had problems with wetting the bed, which made his sisters force him to sleep in a more unpleasant area of the apartment. This discovery made me feel very sorry for him. Growing up, I had only seen one of his sisters, Wu, in Hong Kong a few times. His brother lived in the Philippines

and only came to visit us once. Even then, I sensed that my father was not close to any of his siblings. I always felt that my dad had low self-esteem, and I finally understood that this was likely because of his being abandoned by his birth family and his suffering mistreatment by his adopted family. I finally came to understand why he lived such a solitary life: my dad had never truly experienced love and affection.

My grandfather had died as a result of trying to intervene during a dispute between two parties. My mother was only a few years old at the time. Being the oldest sibling, she had to learn to take care of her family at a very early age, assuming the father's role in protecting and nurturing her younger brother as well as my grandmother. As a result, during these years, my mother developed a strong and self-reliant character.

In learning about my family of origin, I came to recognize my parents' pattern of behavior. From my course, I was taught about the dynamic of the pursuer and the distancer pattern (Firestone, 2017). The pursuer is the overly engaged one, with high expectations and inclinations to overreact; in contrast, the distancer is the laid back one, avoiding attachment, reluctant to invest in relationships, and trying to escape. Understanding that my dad's behavior was a result of his upbringing, I became more sympathetic toward him. His character weaknesses prevented him from having the courage to raise his own family. This was an awakening experience; it helped me to learn to let go and forgive my

father for his decision to give up his obligation to raise us and support us financially and emotionally.

In the first year of our program, we were also required to receive counseling before we were to counsel others. The counseling turned out to be a journey of ‘detoxing’ for me as I had to wrestle with and resolve all the suppressed anger and bitterness I had been feeling toward my father, my mother, and my mother’s boyfriend. The counseling helped me to forgive them.

Struggles in My First Year of Seminary Life: A Process of ‘Deconstruction’

Seminary life signaled the beginning of adapting to a new ‘culture.’ Someone had described seminary life to be like a cross-cultural experience. Growing up with a gospel church background, both in Hong Kong and Toronto, I was taught to interpret the Bible from only one theological perspective. Thus, when I had to study eschatology, a systematic approach to viewing the end times, I was surprised to find out how narrow-minded I was when I was introduced to different theological perspectives.

Similarly, in one of my counseling classes, Dr. Cunningham, our professor, challenged a belief that a student upheld. The student, feeling frustrated, commented: “I used to think that I knew something, but now I am totally shaken. I do not know what I believe now.” Our professor replied: “Isn’t that true of people who seek counseling? Because their belief system is in conflict with their experience, they suffer tension and disorientation. There is a need to reframe their

beliefs in order for them to realize that their traditional beliefs are not *the way* but just *a way* of seeing things.” Thus, the first year of seminary could be characterized as one of deconstruction and reconstruction: I learned to become less opinionated and more open-minded about my ideas and beliefs.

Furthermore, studying to become a pastor and realizing that I would eventually have to preach, I grew fearful about the future. I like to talk in one-on-one settings or in a group, but the idea of speaking to over a hundred people makes me panic. Studying Old Testament Theology, I did a research paper on the call of Moses. The Lord used this assignment as a great learning experience: I learned the difference between focusing on my ability versus focusing on who He is. A self-centered life is ruled by fear; a life that focuses on God reveals His almighty power. When Moses voiced his doubts, the Lord asked him: “Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” (Exodus 4:11). This lesson offered a big relief as I journeyed from feeling fear to relying on faith.

My Spiritual Mentor: Rev. Barclay Chong

I was baptized on April 28th, 1991 by Rev. Barclay Chong, the senior pastor of Cornerstone Gospel Church (presently Cornerstone Alliance Church). I started attending this church since my first week in Canada. Then I started full-time ministry in 1999. Rev. Chong greatly shaped my theological view of ministry, evangelism, and discipleship. He came from a fundamentalist

background, which emphasized the inerrancy of Scripture and other core beliefs of the Christian faith. Wang Ming-Dao and John Sung, two well-known fundamentalists, had shaped Rev. Chong's faith journey. Most Christians brought up in Chinese churches during the fifties to nineties would have likely read their writings or biographies and been shaped by them.

Rev. Chong was my spiritual mentor. He greatly influenced my understanding of what it means to be a servant leader. He went through a dramatic experience when he was called to ministry. After graduating from high school, he felt called to ministry, but his father, an elder of the church, was strongly against his decision. While Rev. Chong was filling out his application to seminary, his father held up a knife to threaten him, ordering him to stop what he was doing. His father said fiercely: "Don't you know how complicated churches are?" When I heard Rev. Chong's story, I thought he was joking. I thought, "How could a church be a complicated place?" Many years later, after becoming a pastor, I realized that this was no joke.

As a youth, Rev. Chong had difficulty with his speech, speaking in broken sentences. His academic performance was so poor that he had to change secondary schools in Hong Kong at least half a dozen times. However, the Lord later healed him and he overcame these obstacles. After graduating from the Hong Kong Overseas Seminary at the age of nineteen, he was invited to preach at different churches; in only a few years, he became a popular evangelist at different campus crusades. Any time I have mentioned Rev. Chong's name to

others, they always say that they have heard of him, and some of them have shared that they were converted under his preaching. God had miraculously delivered Rev. Chong and made him an eloquent speaker who preached the gospel so powerfully that he led many young people to Christ. His testimony was legendary to me.

During weekly Sunday services at our church, Rev. Chong's sermons were typically an hour long. When I was studying in seminary, however, I was shocked to learn that most sermons at other churches were only 20 to 40 minutes long. Rev. Chong was such a gifted and animated preacher that his one-hour sermons were not boring at all. They were always uplifting. In fact, I could picture him speaking powerfully like Billy Graham at large evangelistic crusades.

Upon discovering that I had dedicated myself to serving the Lord full-time, Rev. Chong invited me to join his discipleship group along with others who had committed themselves to full-time Christian ministry. In 1996, he started a fellowship for us known as Paul Fellowship, which consisted of six to seven individuals. We gathered at his home monthly. Not only did he share about his difficulties in ministry, but he also taught us how to preach. Besides being gifted in teaching and preaching, Rev. Chong was also open about women serving in ministry. He inspired the women in the group by encouraging them to not simply see themselves fulfilling traditional roles who simply did visitations and caring. He encouraged us to prepare ourselves for pulpit ministry, powerfully delivering the Word of God, and engaging with people in their daily lives, even if it meant

rolling on the grass and playing sports. Unlike many seminary students who did not have a chance to preach at their own churches, Rev. Chong put us on the preaching roster at our church. On February 22, 1998, I preached my first sermon on Genesis 3. The sermon was entitled “Hiding No More.” I had written down Rev. Chong’s comments in my journal, which I found very encouraging: “Very good. I can go over with you for some comments, and then you can use it to preach at other churches, or to use it as evangelism.”

Rev. Chong did not put boundaries on his ministry. If he saw someone in need, he was willing to give up his personal time and time with family to tend to that need. I believe he was deeply influenced by the older generation of preachers, such as Watchman Nee, John Sung, and Wang Ming Tao. For example, once Alfred and I had made an appointment to meet with Rev. Chong at a 24-hour café after our Wednesday night prayer meeting, which ended at 10 p.m. Our conversation did not finish until sometime around three o’clock in the morning. When Alfred’s mother found out that his pastor had spent time talking to him until after midnight, she was angry and asked for Rev. Chong’s phone number so that she could call him and rebuke him for being a poor role model. Rev. Chong apologized to Alfred’s mother. On another occasion, Rev. Chong also used his Sabbath day, Monday, to help two other couples, along with Alfred and me, to do group pre-marital counseling after we became engaged.

Rev. Chong was known to our congregation for his total dedication and sacrifice to the ministry of the Lord. For at least twelve seminary students who

were mentored by him, we all witnessed that he set no boundaries for his life of godly service (although this did result in periods when he was feeling burnt out). A few years after I left the church, Rev. Chong joined the Alliance Churches of Canada. Presently, he is serving in the mission field, equipping marketplace leaders.

My Jewish Landlady

Two years after my mother passed away, my younger sister Jade came to stay with me and went to the same high school that I had attended. It was my first year in seminary. We were grateful to be able to rent two bedrooms of a house near Bathurst and Steeles. Our landlady, Mrs. Bedder, was a Jewish lady from Russia who was divorced with two adult sons. She lived alone; occasionally, one of her sons Harry came to visit and stayed in the basement. Mrs. Bedder was not particularly friendly or warm. She was rather uptight and rigid, and she was this way even with her son.

Staying at Mrs. Bedder's place was not the most enjoyable experience. Jade and I cooked rice for most of our meals; however, Mrs. Bedder did not seem to like the smell of steaming rice, even though I tried to turn on the fan whenever I cooked. One day, when I returned home from seminary and wanted to use the electronic rice cooker, we could not locate it; Jade and I spent a long time looking for it since Mrs. Bedder was not at home. We eventually found it in the garage.

Both Jade and I were upset about this since her actions were so rude. It was disrespectful to store away our possession without informing us.

After we stayed at the house for a year, we decided to move. The Lord provided us a two-bedroom condominium in the same intersection. Having our own place gave us the liberty to invite friends over and cook whatever we wanted. I was still grateful to have lived in Mrs. Bedder's house. Most importantly, living at Mrs. Bedder's home gave me the opportunity to meet and lead Teresa to Christ, a story I will tell next. If I had not moved there, I would not have developed such a special friendship with her. God provided me the opportunity to share my faith as well as learn to shepherd a new spiritual convert. In return, God used Teresa to show me compassion, tenderness, and attentive motherly love.

Sharing the Good News with Teresa

One day, while jogging at a nearby park around this Jewish neighborhood, I saw a lady who appeared to be in her late sixties sitting quietly on a bench. I smiled at her and asked if she lived nearby. She told me her name was Teresa and she lived only a few minutes away from the park. I told her that I lived on Mullen Drive and was going to a seminary not too far away from the park. We had a good conversation. Afterward, I walked her home because she wanted to show me where she lived, and then we exchanged phone numbers. After that first meeting, we met regularly at the park. Then one day when she was sharing about how she was not getting along with her son and daughter-in-law, I saw an opportunity to

share the gospel with her. I told her about Jesus and how she can share her burden with Jesus through prayer and ask Him for guidance whenever she was distressed. Teresa eventually decided to accept Christ, and after a few weeks, I asked if I could visit her with another friend of mine, Patrick, so we could explain to her what it meant to be a Christian. Teresa agreed, and we began meeting at her home weekly for about two months. Patrick was one of my fellowship friends at church who lived on the same street as me. He was a devoted Christian who kindly offered my sister and me a ride whenever we needed a lift. Teresa liked Patrick because he was gentle, helpful, and cheerful. Shortly after, Teresa began attending Sunday school and Sunday worship at our church. She also joined the senior fellowship where she made some friends.

One day, Teresa shared with me about her struggles. She was deciding whether she should go to Chicago to stay with her daughter so that she would receive better personal care. A few months later, she did move. We continued to talk regularly on the phone. About five years later, she came back to Canada and moved to a nursing home in Scarborough called St. Paul's L'Amorerux Centre. I visited her often, taking her out for dim sum and grocery shopping when I had a day off from serving at church. Teresa treats me like her daughter. Almost everything I share with her, she remembers dearly, and she constantly follows up with me regarding how things are. I have always been amazed by her thoughtfulness and how well she recalls the details of my life. Sometimes, she even asked about the other people in my life, like my sister, or Alfred's grandpa

and how his health was. Teresa is a humble, caring, and considerate person. I treat her like my own mother or grandmother. It is like she plays the role of *Faithful* in my life (Bunyan 1959): she is a person who is always there for me, faithfully listening to me and storing everything so dearly in her heart. She also regularly sends me birthday and anniversary cards, a custom that even the most faithful of friends no longer do. Although staying at the home of Mrs. Bedder was not the most pleasant experience for Jade and me, it was nonetheless a valuable opportunity for me to learn to get along with different people: some are sour, and some are sweet like Teresa.

Beginning Marriage and Pastoral Ministry

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children.
For what children are not disciplined by their father?
(Hebrew, 12:7).

One Saturday morning in 1997, Alfred came to visit me. He blindfolded me and told me that he wanted to take me somewhere. During the half hour car ride, I talked to him as if I could see everything. When we arrived, Alfred escorted me to the designated place and helped me to sit down. He then asked me to stretch out my hand and try to rummage around in a box that he presented to me. Still blindfolded, I felt a box that was surrounded by petals. Shortly after, Alfred took off my blindfold. I then discovered that I was sitting in a garden of the college of our university, a place where we often took our strolls. Every May, when we would pass by the college, we would see the ground covered with petals that came from a pink Magnolia tree. Magnolia is a tree that blooms for two

weeks during the early spring. The first time we walked by this garden, Alfred had picked a flower for me, the first flower he ever gave to me. Alfred then asked me to open the box I was holding, and there lay a beautiful, glistening diamond sitting inside a pink Magnolia flower. Alfred went on his knee and asked me to marry him. I was amazed by his thoughtfulness and romantic spirit. About 15 months later we were married on August 22nd, 1998.

Our marriage signaled a new beginning for us as we learned this new dance together. We began praying to the Lord to seek His guidance for ministry opportunities ahead. Shortly after, a sister named Bobo, who served in a church in Toronto, St. Christopher's Anglican Church, as a youth worker and director of a community center, came to ask me to consider taking the position that she was serving in since she was planning to go back to Hong Kong permanently. The church belonged to the Anglican denomination, which I was not familiar with. I had also never worked in a community center before. In fact, I had no work experience at all. Feeling anxious, I committed the decision to prayer, and after some time, I found that the Lord was opening the door to this opportunity for me. My interview was successful. The church liked that I had an Alliance background (my mother church was a member of the Missionary Alliance Church). They also wanted to hire a pastor who had a strong background in evangelism. Around November of 1998, they offered me the job to start on Jan. 1999, and I was given three titles: Parish Assistant, Director of the St. Christopher Centre, and Youth Pastor of the English congregation. They hired a secretary to help me with the

administration and registration work since I was responsible for hosting eight to ten classes every week. I was also delighted to be granted four weeks of paid vacation leave annually.

Serving in an Anglican church felt like a cross-cultural experience. I was not used to its liturgical worship style in which everything was scripted. It was different from the more free and spontaneous worship style that I had learned from Rev. Chong in our church tradition. In fact, my world had been quite small: I had only attended two churches my whole life, one in Hong Kong and one in Toronto, and both of them were gospel churches. My supervisor, Rev. Der, gave me a handbook so that I could learn more about Anglicanism. Working in an Anglican church required some adjustment. The sermons were less than 20 minutes long. I had grown to appreciate the hour-long sermons preached at my home church, so I felt that the short sermons lacked substance. Reading and preaching from the lectionary was another element that I had to adjust to. Gradually, however, I realized that evangelical churches put too much emphasis on the main course, the sermon. On the other hand, Anglican churches put emphasis on every part of the liturgy, with Communion being the climax of the worship. I also appreciated the church's structured prayer. Never exposed to a prayer book in my life, I found that the Book of Common Prayer was very rich and full of many types of prayers for various circumstances and church seasons to guide people in nurturing their relationship with God.

When it was my turn to preach, I had to wear a white robe. I had to preach in three different services, two in Cantonese and one in English: first, at the Community Centre, a branch of the church; second, to the English congregation, mainly the second-generation youth of the mother church; and third, to the Cantonese service, the mother church located at North York whose members comprise mainly the former students of the ‘elite’ school St. Paul Co-Educational College in Hong Kong. It was a great learning opportunity to fulfill three roles. After I preached for the first time, a deacon’s wife told me, “Paddy, you are so young and you preach so well—your future opportunities will be limitless.” I felt so encouraged by her compliment since, for me, preaching was the most terrifying duty of a pastor. Every preaching opportunity was a moment that enabled me to grow closer to the Lord as I had to trust in His work and His anointing power to be with me when I was preaching. In particular, I prayed that the Lord would allow the Bible passage to touch me first before I preached. This was a challenge for me because my spirit was often distracted by my fear of preaching. Besides preaching, I was invited to start an adult Sunday school class on the book of Ephesians. This was yet another challenge since I had never taught a book of the Bible at my own church.

There was a big learning curve for me to serve as a youth pastor in the English ministry. There were so many programs that were established by my friend Bobo. Not only did I have to sustain these existing programs, I assumed the additional pastoral role of Parish Assistant (Bobo had worked more as a social

worker). This meant the further responsibilities of preaching, teaching, and caring for the needs of three congregations, including members at the community center, the congregation at St. Christopher's Anglican Church, and the youth in the English ministry. I nonetheless enjoyed all of these challenging roles. I even had the opportunity to be a governor for the softball team, giving devotional messages before a game and playing on a team that was lacking female players.

I was required to work at the community center daily, overseeing eight to ten programs, including different levels of Tai Chi, line dancing, citizenship, and ESL classes. Occasionally, I led a weekly Bible study and gave a homily in most of the classes except the citizenship class. I also participated in a few sessions of the line dancing class and made acquaintances with the ladies who were extremely happy to see me dancing along with them. I also started two groups that were meant to draw women from the community. The first was a support group for parents. I enlisted the assistance of a North York Nurse, Elizabeth Ann Ho, to offer guidance to the mothers. The second was Women's Corner, where women gathered to listen to a series of topics that served to nurture personal growth, from hobbies to life issues. I also organized evangelistic events that aimed to share the gospel with the community in a more solid way.

All the demands of this position motivated me to strive more to equip myself for the various teaching opportunities that lay before me. To stay organized, I started collecting and documenting teaching ideas and resources that were ideal for different venues, including sermon illustrations and homilies for the

youth and community. Of course, leading these many programs was not possible without the help of four dedicated ladies, most of whom were either housewives or early retirees. As a young pastor serving in my first year, I was thankful that the workload was manageable. However, I eventually discovered the hidden challenges of serving in the ministry.

One time, I commented on how “great” the gospel Chinese opera team was to devote their time every week to practicing and performing. However, a church volunteer said that my language was too “much,” believing that my use of the word “great” was used inadequately and that such a word should only be used to describe a hero who died for his nation. I responded by saying that I did not agree and did not see the problem with my description. Afterward, my supervisor, when giving me feedback on how I could improve, shared with me that the ladies thought I did not listen to people’s opinions. Incidents like this one taught me about the need to be tactful when expressing my opinions and handling criticism. Another time, a couple complained about me, saying that I did not say “hi” to them when they smiled at me. As a pastor, I have always tried to greet and smile at as many people as I can, but I cannot always catch who is smiling or waving at me from a distance. Deep down in my heart, I desire to show my love and care for every individual in the church. I was shocked when this couple eventually approached another church leader and expressed how angry they were that I did not greet them. The reason for this anger, I later discovered, was that this couple believed that they were contributing to part of my salary through their tithing. I

was disappointed to learn that even Christians thought this way. If I were to greet the couple simply because they had contributed to my salary, would I still be a person worthy of their respect? As a new pastor, I was suddenly made aware of this “employer” mentality existing in the parish, and I would eventually find out that this mentality was not unique to this congregation.

I met with my supervisor Rev. Der on a weekly basis. He was an observant, precise, and detail-oriented person (during one meeting, he even corrected my pronunciation of “tentatively,” alerting me that I had put stress on the wrong syllable). In these meetings, he sometimes disclosed the comments he received about me. One time, I visited an adult fellowship that took place on the upper level of a member’s home. I excused myself at one point to get some water. I went to the kitchen on the lower level, but, not knowing where the glasses were stored, I had to open several cupboards to find the glasses. This action, however, was interpreted as impolite. The negative feedback I received as a result of this seemingly ordinary action of mine taught me a lesson that I never learned in seminary. As I reflected on these complaints about my conduct, I became aware of the problem. I did not grow up with a typical family that was able to train me to be mindful of these little details. Alfred, on the other hand, was brought up this way. Furthermore, my years of living with Caucasian roommates reinforced my carefree spirit. As a result, I did not develop the extra sensitive and courteous spirit that the Chinese community expected of me. My lack of work experience, my lack of the Chinese cultural understanding of ‘face’ and the conduct this

demanded, and my western influence led others to see me as too direct and disrespectful. This lack of awareness and oversight brought me a painful lesson.

Though these seemingly ‘minor’ incidents were hurtful to me, through them God seemed to be speaking to me about my character. Suffering and the journey toward building one’s character seem inseparable. Helen Keller’s famous quote imparts wisdom: “Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved” (Helen Keller Quotes, 2018).

I left this church after a year because of our ‘cultural’ differences. My supervisor kindly took me out for a final lunch. He told me that I was one of the most outstanding seminary graduates he had ever worked with. However, he said that if there was going to be one thing I could improve on, it was learning to be humble. I have stored his words in my heart ever since, being purposely watchful of areas where I have been overly proud.

Although my time serving in this Anglican Church was short, I felt like I had gone through intensive training in preparation for serving in my future ministry. One factor that greatly shaped my ministry life was my supervisor who introduced to me many settings for silent retreats. I was surprised to find out that the Anglican denomination owned so many different convents. The evangelical retreat settings I was familiar with were meant more for teaching and fellowshiping. It was through the Anglican Church that I discovered the silent retreat, which provided a space for me to experience true solitude. This allowed

me to hear both the voices of my soul and the voice of God. Being a pastor means constantly being over-engaged and stimulated—there are always obligations to meet the endless needs of the congregation. Upon reflection, the demanding workload with my multiple roles gave me a good opportunity to learn, study, and collect ideas, which provided me with the necessary resources to teach others. However, the pastoral environment was not healthy for a formational life because I was too enthusiastic about exercising my gifts through service and action. I was therefore thankful to be exposed to different retreat formats and traditions, and this exposure planted a seed for my future interest in the area of spiritual retreat and spiritual formation.

Ministries in the Baptist Church

For the next two and a half years, the Lord led me to serve in a Baptist church as a Caring Pastor. I always joked, “I am the only ‘caring’ pastor in the church.” My role was to focus on small groups. The Teaching pastor who was responsible for training the small group leaders followed the Purpose Driven Model. I also needed to host the huddling meeting where every small group leader updated and reported their needs and thanksgiving items. This church was unique in that it did not have the traditional large fellowship gatherings. The only fellowship that was relatively small served the seekers; specific topics were presented at each meeting to meet the seekers’ needs. Most of the congregation was in their fifties. As a young couple, my husband and I felt the desire to gather

with people closer to our age, so I started a young couple's small group and invited a few mature couples to be its core members. The group quickly grew to over ten couples and multiplied to two groups within a year. It was a great joy to see the couples develop these relationships with one another, feeling a sense of belonging with people in a similar life stage.

The church also had a successful line dancing ministry, an increasing popular outreach program among many Chinese churches these days. Besides being invited to give a homily during their breaks, I was also invited to their small group to offer support to the group leader, Richard Chan. Eventually I became very close to Richard and his wife Mei. They trusted me so much that they approached me when their family needed my help. Likewise, once when Alfred was sick and most clinics were closed, Richard, who was a family doctor came to see him and wrote him the necessary prescription.

Richard's son Eric, who was about twenty-five-years-old, was going through some struggles in his life. I expressed my care by inviting Eric and his younger brother Leo to our home for dinner. Alfred and I had a wonderful time conversing with them. They appreciated the food and our teaching them how to play the game Rummy O. Both brothers were smart and played the game very well. A few days later, Mei told me that Eric had shared with her his admiration for the loving relationship between Alfred and me. I had also personally met with Eric a few times since he had been suffering from depression. He said that he had lost his purpose for living (at this point he had stopped working and was staying

home all day long). One day, Mei had asked Eric whether there was a person he would like to spend the day with, and he answered, “Pastor Paddy.” When Mei told me this, I felt so honored to be the person he felt comfortable with. Once, while taking a walk at Toogood Pond in Unionville, Eric admitted to me that he was too “chicken” to kill himself. He was extremely bright and often asked deep philosophical questions, yet he had difficulty seeing the positive aspects of his life. Because Eric had refused to seek professional help, I tried my best to be his mentor. However, a few months later, Eric had committed suicide. I was shocked and sad to discover that Eric had found his situation so hopeless that he decided to end his life. Although I had witnessed Eric’s pain, I felt that there were many aspects about his struggle that I simply did not understand. I felt so remorseful for not being able to help him. At the same time, both Alfred and I were grateful that we had the privilege of walking with Eric for his last mile. Looking back, I see that Eric had felt so lonely: he had no connection with anyone even though he had grown up in the church. The traditional form of youth group could not accommodate this “misfit.” How much I wish I had been better equipped and trained as a spiritual director to help him discern God’s voice and minister more effectively in his life.

A Trial: Learning a Lesson of Faith

One day, I accidentally discovered a lump in my neck. After consulting my family doctor, I was told to have it removed because a benign lump could

potentially become malignant. I was sent for a biopsy, and the results were ambiguous: the lump was possibly cancerous, yet it could not be confirmed until a surgery was performed. Meanwhile, I was informed about the risks of the surgery. The worst case scenario was that my facial nerve could be accidentally cut, which could leave the side of my face permanently paralyzed. I struggled with deciding whether to do the surgery, thinking that if the worst case scenario were to happen, it would be worse than having cancer. A church member who was a doctor suggested that I go ahead with the surgery. In addition, he recommended a very good ENT (Ear, Nose and Throat) specialist who could give me a second opinion as well as an experienced ENT surgeon.

This whole ordeal put my faith in God to the greatest test. Although the possibility of the worst-case scenario occurring was only a few percent, in my mind it felt much greater, like the surgery was either a pass or fail. Up until the day before my surgery, I was reading the book of Hebrews. Amazingly, chapter 11 happened to fall on the eve of my surgery date. I believe that this was not coincidental and that the Lord wanted me to learn a lesson of faith during this difficult time. Chapter 11 described saints who had lived out the faith, including Abraham, Enoch, and Noah. I was especially touched by the striking message: “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Heb. 11:9). I felt challenged by what I had been reading: if I truly believed in God, I would realize that my life was in God’s hands. I found great consolation in

these words, and I was thankful for the timely divine message. The day of the surgery in July 2001, I surrendered my life to God, knowing that He was in control of my life and that He was greater than even the greatest doctors.

Praise the Lord that the surgery was successful. My facial nerves were slightly traumatized by the surgery and it took a month for me to recover from the numbness. I had a seven-inch incision, and I was stitched up by surgery 'staples' all the way from the edge of my ear to my neck. The surgeon was very skillful, paying attention to cosmetics by minimizing the visibility of the scar. Besides taking out a grape-sized tumor, the surgeon also removed another four-inch in diameter mass that encircled the tumor, including my salivary glands. This left me with only one set of salivary gland, which caused my mouth to feel dry all the time. I was told it would take two weeks before the results from the surgery would come in. Mentally, the two weeks felt a lot longer. While I was praying for the best results, I prepared myself for bad news. In the meantime, I was experiencing intense pain from the drainage tube that was inserted inside the area where I had the surgery. A nurse was sent to me daily to help drain out the blood. During this period of recovery, I began to see how pain could make a human being feel extremely lonely because no one can understand what you are going through nor can they take the pain away. It was hard to imagine the extent of pain that Christ had to bear for the sake of saving me from my sins. He was my only companion who could understand my pain. It was this sense of loneliness and disorientation

that created a 'liminal space', a sacred space for the divine and the human to come close to one another, a place for the renewing of the soul.

Two weeks later, the surgeon called me and told me that I had Lymphoma, a cancer of the lymph nodes. I tried to stay calm and asked what my next step would be. My surgeon said radiation therapy, which would most likely involve a four-week treatment, five times per week. As a Caring pastor, I had cared for many cancer patients, so I was somewhat prepared for the reality that I might have cancer one day. However, when I heard the news, I was still in disbelief. The idea that I had cancer felt unreal. It was not that I doubted the doctor's diagnosis. In my head, I believed it. However, I found the fact hard to accept, given that I was still young, had only been married for not even three years, and had always led a healthy lifestyle.

After doing some research and meeting with my surgeon and oncologist, I was informed about the side effects of radiation therapy. Besides having already lost a set of my salivary glands which caused excessive dryness in my mouth, I was told that radiation therapy would exacerbate the dryness since it would be destroying more salivary cells. I expressed my concerns about this since I was already feeling so much discomfort in my mouth. The surgeon then put the situation into perspective for me, asking me whether I preferred having no saliva or no life.

My oncologist later sent me to the Sojgren's Clinic, the only clinic in Canada that provides a diagnosis of Sojgren's syndrome. Sojgren's syndrome is

an auto-immune disorder associated with dry eyes and dry mouth, and could also be associated with hearing and joint problems. A few days after my visit to this clinic, it was confirmed that I had Sjogren's syndrome. In a short period, my life had suddenly become filled with endless medical appointments.

A few weeks after recovering from my surgery, I began radiation therapy. God's love was made very real to me during this difficult time. Many people offered their love and support through different means, such as sending me flowers and cards. My parents-in-law were so kind to give me a ride to the hospital every day. A group of ladies I worked with organized a group of people to bring me meals. Others volunteered to help me with practical duties around my house. During this time, I felt the tremendous blessing and privilege of being part of a community of faith. These people who were helping and caring for me taught me about what it truly meant to be a nurturing caregiver. At the same time, facing this fearful and lonely journey, only the presence of God's love was an abiding comfort. Before receiving every radiation treatment, I prayed for God's protective hands to be over me to minimize the treatment's side effects and damage to my body. In this shadow of darkness, the Lord was my sole and dear companion. I felt how precious it was to be a child of God. This unconditional love was the antidote to treat my feelings of being orphaned. By His love, I was adopted, and because of His love, a community of His people gave to me selflessly.

I had taken three months of sick leave. I felt a great sense of peace as I embarked onto this unexpected journey. One of the side effects was fatigue, and

for the first time, I, the energetic person, understood what it really meant to have no energy. Although my mouth was still dry as a result of the surgery, radiation therapy, and my Sjogren's syndrome, it was not as bad as I had anticipated. A visitor had even asked me why my hair was still long, given the treatment I was receiving; I joked with her and asked her what she thought of my "wig" (I actually did not lose any hair).

I was grateful for experiencing minimum pain. I was thankful for the Lord's protection and care and the overwhelming sense of love I received from brothers and sisters in Christ. In retrospect, through this trial, God empowered me to fully place my trust in Him and Him alone. Not only was my faith strengthened, but my compassion for those who were sick was also heightened. Later on, whenever individuals came to me and told me that they had cancer, I was able to empathize with them and share with them about my own painful experiences and how God delivered me from them. Because they could see I understood what they were going through, there was a sense of trust and openness between us. As a result, this journey of battling cancer ultimately opened up more opportunities for me to minister to those who were in need and hurting. While the journey certainly had not been easy, I am able to thank God for putting me through it, for it trained me and shaped me for His glory.

Learning the Importance of Building Relationships in Ministry

Two lessons I learned at this church was the importance of cultivating relationships and building a sustainable ministry. As a young pastor, I had believed that focusing on ministry was important to demonstrate my skills; I later realized that I had not been intentional enough in caring for the personal and spiritual lives of the people. If I could have done things differently, I would have invested more time in looking after the spiritual health of my core team. I had erroneously believed that the people serving in the ministry team who were committed and active were also spiritual. In reality, I found out that an individual's level of commitment was not necessarily a reflection of his or her spiritual maturity. This was what I learned while serving in a Baptist church. While its system naturally gave rise to many administratively strong leaders, yet the spiritual maturity of these leaders could be found wanting. This is how I learned to focus on people's spiritual life first rather than simply focusing on the ministry work itself.

A Blessed Marriage

“When God brought the first man his spouse, he brought him not just a lover but the friend his heart had been seeking.”
(Timothy Keller 2013, 127).

One of the greatest blessings in my life is the companionship of my husband, Alfred. He is the most wonderful man I have ever met. I was so blessed to have his company when we were dating when I had suffered the loss of my

mother. To me, his love for me reflects God's love. Besides the romantic love he has always shown me, I sometimes joke with Alfred that his love for me has been so unconditional that it is like it is compensating for the lack of parental love that I received while growing up.

Alfred is a real gentleman. I know that many Chinese husbands no longer open the car door for their spouse, yet Alfred has persisted in doing so since the day we met. On cold winter nights, Alfred always serves as a bed warmer: while I am getting ready for bed in the washroom, brushing my teeth and applying lotion, Alfred warms my side of the bed by lying on it, so that by the time I go to sleep, my side is always warm.

Once when we invited his manager over for dinner, his manager told me a hilarious story about Alfred. She said that during one of their coaching sessions, she wanted to motivate Alfred, so she asked him what made him happy—was it buying a new car, taking a vacation, or getting promoted? The manager was blown away by Alfred's reply: "When my wife is happy, I am happy!" Because I believe that a successful man is one who has a happy wife, I always let Alfred know that he is a successful man since I am so content and joyful. Alfred has always been a creative and romantic spouse. One Valentine's Day, he gave me five coupons representing each of the Five Love Languages: Acts of Service, Quality Time, Physical Touch, Receiving Gifts, and Words of Affirmation. The coupon services included foot massages and a "poem on demand."

My Best Friend and Ministry Partner

It is amazing that both Alfred and I have so many common interests.

Whenever I give a talk on marriage, I always encourage couples to develop interests that enable them to enjoy each other's companionship. I have discovered, however, that few couples try to nurture common interests after they are married. When Alfred and I were in university, we enjoyed swimming, playing tennis, and going to the theater together. Amazingly, we still play tennis together. We recently took a few courses together and have even joined a Tennis Club. We also enjoy many outdoor activities, such as canoeing, hiking, and camping.

I still remember the time when we spent four days camping at Algonquin Park for our wedding anniversary. During the trip, we participated in about five outdoor tours led by a naturalist of the park. I learned many fascinating lessons about beavers, wolves, and mushrooms just by walking the trails. At night, Alfred and I pulled our chairs to the lakeside and soaked our feet in the water as we watched the stars glisten in the dark sky. Our deep love for one another is deeply rooted in our enchanting friendship.

Whenever people come to my home, they always praise Alfred for being so helpful. Most of the time, whenever church members came over for dinner, during our long conversations at the table, Alfred was busy doing the dishes (if there was a big gathering, he would be washing the dishes until midnight). When he was in university, he came across an essay about a man whose wife was a

pastor; after reading the article, he prayed about how blessed he would be if he were ever to fill that role one day. Alfred had felt called to be a pastor's spouse.

In 2006, we went to Panama together for a short-term mission trip. We shared the gospel with many people who were suffering because they had been forced to leave their homeland for financial reasons—these were the Chinese laborers who worked all year round from seven in the morning until eleven at night. At one evangelistic meeting, we were able to minister to and lead many students to Christ. We witnessed the joy of these redeemed lives in Christ as we counseled them in their struggles with their bondages to sin.

In 2008, we felt a strong calling to join Medical Service International, MSI, an organization that was headed by the deacon of my former church. On May 12, 2008, an earthquake had hit Sichuan, which claimed over 1000 lives in a secondary school. One of MSI's objectives was to provide earthquake relief through counseling survivors and medical assistance. I always tell people that even though I am a trained counselor, it is Alfred who is the born counselor: the Lord has gifted him with a spirit of attentiveness, sensitivity, discernment, and compassion. During this short-term mission trip, Alfred and I worked as a team to listen to the students, teachers, and villagers who were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. This trip gave us the opportunity to listen firsthand to the heartbreaking story, witness the devastating effects of the earthquake, and meet godly servants from different parts of the world who were unified by the same vision.

Serving on mission trips together has given Alfred and me the opportunity to grow together, personally, spiritually, and missionally. As my ministry partner, Alfred has been my advisor and counselor. There have been so many struggles that I have not been able to share with outsiders, yet Alfred, who understands me so well, has always been able to share with me his wisdom and advice. Similar to all married couples, we face our own struggles. Since Alfred is a very sensitive person, I can easily make him upset when I am not sensitive enough. At the same time, Alfred's sensitive character is what God has used to train me to become a more vigilant and attentive pastor.

Heartbreaking News

The year I returned home after attending my sister's wedding in Hong Kong, I noticed that my menstrual cycle had strangely persisted for over two weeks. My family doctor did a blood test. When the results came in, I was informed that I was pregnant but that I was experiencing a miscarriage. I was ordered to go to the hospital immediately. My doctor warned me of the possibility of surgery. After doing another blood test at the hospital, it was confirmed that I was in the process of miscarrying. Alfred and I were sad about it; we prayed for courage and faith to accept the will of God in our life. After some time, we recovered and hoped that another pregnancy would happen soon. However, I was told by the doctor that it would be very difficult for me to become pregnant again. We struggled with this diagnosis and even considered the possibility of adoption.

However, circumstances took place that did not seem to open a door to this. Thus, we continued to trust God for whatever He had planned for us. Meanwhile, as husband and wife, we continued to minister to as many spiritual children as we could, regularly opening up our home, making it a warm place to cultivate friendships through the ministry of hospitality, this desire coming from the love and kindness I received from the many hospitable angels in my life.

Couple's Ministry of Hospitality

There were a few families at this Baptist church that I will never forget. A senior couple, the Hui's, had been very hospitable to both me and my husband. After the publication of an interview with me in a church newsletter, the congregation knew more about my life as well as the food I liked. Discovering that I liked lamb, this couple invited us regularly over to their home for lamb dinner. There was another deacon whom I considered to be a truly spiritual man. He and his wife expressed a lot of love to us, particularly when I was sick. As a doctor, the deacon not only offered me helpful medical advice, but he often took Alfred and me out for lunch. In fact, this deacon frequently sought to mentor the young people in our church by meeting them for lunch. He also treated the pastors for lunch on a regular basis just to care for them. It was this deacon who taught me about the importance of nurturing relationships in the church.

Meanwhile, I also had the chance to grow close to a group of young people from the English congregation: Grace, Kevin, Emily, and Colin. I was like

a magnet to them: they came to our home almost every other week, enjoying the meals we prepared for them and leaving a personal message in my guestbook. I had a lot of good memories with these youths. Grace and Kevin were dating at the time; when they were about to be married, Grace asked me to be her bridesmaid. I felt honored by her invitation, but I did not think it was appropriate for me to accept it, even though our relationship was more than that between a pastor and parishioner. Shortly after 2003, the Lord led me to serve at another Baptist church as a Caring pastor. Nonetheless, having developed strong friendships with each other, we continued to meet regularly. Kevin eventually went to seminary, and they have been serving the Lord faithfully in a church ever since. They have also been homeschooling their four children, which I find to be an amazing spiritual model of Christian parenting.

Hospitality Extended to Our Neighbors

In recent years, I have had a heart for missional living, seeking a way to bring the redemptive love of Christ to my community. In the past, I participated in many evangelistic programs and events that aimed to bring the good news to non-Christians. These days, I have not relied on programs and events for evangelism. I have learned to extend my pastoral ministry to my neighborhood.

In 2012, when Alfred and I moved in to the neighborhood where we still live today, we knocked on every door to introduce ourselves. We invited them to a barbeque event so we could become acquainted with our neighbors. At the time,

our backyard fences had not yet been installed. We invited the 15 to 20 families who lived both directly across from our house and from the back of our house. Amazingly, about 70 people showed up, many of the owners coming with their parents, kids, and relatives. We have continued to bond with most of these people by hosting Christmas dinners and garage sales. We even launched a Neighborhood Watch Campaign during which a police officer came to my house to present neighborhood safety guidelines to any neighbor interested in joining.

I also created a WhatsApp group (comprising 45 neighbours) in which I post community news and photos of suspicious figures seen on our streets. During the summer, we open our 'soul' garden where I regularly host spiritual formation retreats for my neighbors (their kids are welcome to come along to enjoy drinks and ice-cream). The Chinese neighbors have given me a nick-name, 村組 (*village leader*). Sometimes, people jokingly ask if I am a ward counselor.

In one incident, I deliberately began a conversation with a stranger who had parked his car in front of my garden. Feeling suspicious, I also intentionally memorized his license plate number before entering my house. In doing so, I was able to assist police officers in identifying this suspect (along with two other suspects) who was involved in breaking into a house near my street. I had led the police officer to a few families whose houses were equipped with CCTV cameras. Thankfully, with so many people providing different resources, we successfully helped the officers prosecute two out of the three suspects. It was encouraging to all the people in our group.

God has given me a heart for missional practices through these gestures of kindness, such as visiting a newborn baby, sharing vegetables from my garden, hosting a fundraising event, or giving a sympathy card to the neighbor whose house was broken into. I feel freedom and joy as a result of living missionally. In addition, Alfred has been a blessing by supporting me in all my endeavors. Neighbors and our Christian brothers and sisters have always seen us as a team in ministry. It is a blessing to be a witness for Christ through the way we live and the way we love!

A Challenging Life Lesson

It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.
(Psalm 119:71)

During the year of 20xx at a church where I was serving, I experienced a church conflict. Out of concern for moral sensitivity given the characters involved as well as the need to be to the point, the details and names included have been intentionally omitted, out of respect for the characters involved.

It all began one morning when I preached a sermon from 1 John 4:7-11, and I emphasized the importance of loving one another. However, a believer from the congregation disagreed with an illustration I used, “Home is a Place for Love and not for Reasoning,” and had criticized my sermon in a forum on Facebook.

A few days later, an official letter from this person was addressed to me and copied to all deacons and executives. I was asked to offer a sincere and open apology to the congregation. The executive chair also urged me to respond. I felt

so distressed and sad that a situation that should have been handled privately had escalated to the executive level. I felt like I was being asked to respond not only to a church member but to all my superiors.

I felt overwhelmed by this spirit of criticism that came from not just a single person but a crowd. In this state of distress and pressure, instead of waiting for and listening with a spirit of clarity, I was advised by a church leader to let the board discuss how I should respond according to the request specified in the letter. Feeling helpless, I considered this the wisest approach. Thus, I responded to the board by asking for their opinions about the raised concern.

Morris and Olsen in *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* point out well that “sometimes groups in the church seek to prevail by using power influence, reasoned discourse, and carefully plotted strategies” (Morris and Olsen 2012, Kindle 144 of 2496). When that believer had copied the email to all the high level leaders of the church instead of following the biblical teaching regarding expressing concerns or rebuking mistakes. Matthew 18 teaches that one should talk to a person individually; if one refuses to accept one's sin or mistake, then two to three persons should be involved, and if not, the church. This member had gone to the governing board of the church first.

But I realized that I, too, was in the wrong: instead of listening to God's voice through a discerning process of silence and solitude, I had reacted hastily, feeling pressured by the email from the board chair. It is therefore inspiring when Morris and Olsen describe their model:

It is about a process like a dance by which a religious group comes to rest on a course of action. In the dance, all of the participants' wisdom and gifts—humility, reason, intuition, tradition, religious practice—are called forth until the divine presence breaks in and lights the right path, offering sight and guidance to individuals and to the group. (Morris & Olsen 2012, Kindle 146 of 2496)

Because I did not exercise a discerning spirit, I imprudently replaced the voice of God with that of a human church leader who merely gave advice that they hoped would quickly resolve the problem.

Another incident happened the day before I received the official complaint email. During a weekly staff meeting, I attempted to seek clarification regarding taking time away to be the speaker for a Family Camp at another church. However, a few days later, I was issued a warning for asking this question so openly at the meeting. It was perceived as a challenge to my superior's authority. He believed that his instructions were already given: I was to take my own vacation, as outlined by the church manual. I was shocked by his action as my superior was someone I truly loved and respected.

One might be puzzled as to why this seemingly small incident had induced such a severe reaction from the church. I speculate it was a "face" issue. Chinese people, particularly those of the older generation, are very concerned about having "face." When I had asked for clarification regarding what ought to be the practice for pastoral staff who accept invitations from other churches, my attempt to clarify the ambiguity was interpreted as a challenge to the Senior Pastor's authority. I was told that I should have gone to his office privately to ask for an

explanation. I felt bewildered that such a trivial matter to me resulted in such a drastic response. I believe that only when Christians are driven by prestige and honor is there a concern with “saving face” and “losing face.” The issue of “face” reflects how much Chinese people esteem reputation and authority.

In the journal article “Public Face and Private Thrift in Chinese Consumer Behavior” by Li Lin, Dong Xi, and Richard Lueptow, they explain that the “Chinese manage face in their interpersonal interactions by ‘praising’ someone in front of others or presenting token gifts, ‘saving’ someone else’s face by coming to his or her rescue (for instance, by salvaging an embarrassing situation) ...” (Lin, Xi & Lueptow, 2013, 538). The leader might have felt embarrassed or felt that he had lost face when he gave inconsistent guideline. He perceived a challenge to his authority when *clarification* was raised in the staff meeting. Lin and Lueptow continue: “In such a social environment, how one is perceived by others is of great concern, not only to maintain good relationships, but to protect one’s *mianzi*, or dignity and prestige” (Lin, Xi & Lueptow 2013, 538). China Mike, a blogger, wrote an article entitled “The Cult of Face,” which sheds some light on the contrast between Chinese and Western interpretations:

In the West, many of these slights are seen as minor and quickly forgotten. But in China, failing to appreciate face can cause serious problems. While an American businessperson might be respected back home for his frankness and being a “straight-shooter,” he would likely be viewed in China as uncultured, overbearing, and rude. For instance, an American subordinate attending a meeting where his boss is presenting would generally think nothing of raising a question, making an alternate suggestion, or even disagreeing in front of others. In China, this would be a serious face-losing situation for the subordinate, boss, and even the

company.... Instead, if something goes wrong, always talk privately. Try to avoid assigning blame. (China Mike, 2011)

Furthermore, my request to clarify the situation in light of the church manual guidelines was ultimately irrelevant. China Mike shares this insight gained from his life experience: “It’s perfectly acceptable to tell a lie—even a bold-faced one—if it serves to protect face. China’s culture of shame doesn’t think of lies in terms of right and wrong. Instead, the goal of Chinese truth is often to protect the face of an individual, group, or even nation” (China Mike, 2011). My lack of understanding the importance of upholding the Chinese cultural value of face (exhibited by my western-style directness) ended up bruising the honour of my supervisor. This inexperience led to a professional disaster. What, in my mind, should have been a minor incident ended up being a traumatic experience for me.

My efforts to resolve the problem were in vain. When the ordeal took place, I felt confused, furious, and wounded by what happened. I could not understand why a request for the official governing board to offer me guidance was perceived as an attempt to cause division within the church. My spirit was crushed. I felt abandoned, as if there was nowhere to turn to for comfort or advice. Following the ordeal, I began to suffer from insomnia and depression. God seemed to be so far away. Once, while I was driving, I had the suspicion that the deacon board chair was following me. I consulted a doctor who advised me to take a month off.

Problems that Emerge during the Discerning Process

Describing the limitations of the discerning process, Morris & Olsen state that “when a holy person speaks, dialogue usually ends. He or she has the final word” (Morris & Olsen 2012, Kindle, 185 of 2496). Looking back, I realize that what I was confronting was the problem of the “holy person,” which can be intensified in the context of the Chinese’s “face-giving” culture. When the conflict occurred, there was no investigation of the facts because whatever the “holy person” said was taken as truth. Morris & Olsen also point out that “people have also been hurt because others, overly zealous for a cause, have imposed their own will in the name of God’s will. Because of the way they have made decisions, people in the church may begin to see God’s will as unchanging and immovable, like a rock set in a concrete foundation that must be ‘discovered’ and may become a stumbling block” (Morris & Olsen 2012, Kindle 173 of 2496). When an individual imposes his or her human will on others, claiming it is God’s will, everyone in his or her circle of influence suffers. When biblical knowledge is acquired without genuine personal spiritual renewal and transformation, the concern for personal esteem (or face) is inevitable. This is a sign that the individual needs to surrender himself to God, or else he may end up trading God’s glory for his own personal glory.

In his book *Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Spiritual Purpose, Presence, and Power*, N. Graham Standish describes Adrian Van Kaam’s

emphasis on the significance of the spiritual dimension for both an individual and group. It determines the harmony of all the other dimensions of life. He explains:

Van Kaam stresses the importance of the spiritual dimension to the life of an individual, an organization, and the church. He says that the spiritual dimension is the integrating dimension of life. It holds all the other dimensions in consonance. It is the dimension most concerned with living according to God's purposes. When the spiritual dimension is strong, it does not dominate the other dimensions by denying or controlling them. Instead, it guides and integrates the other dimensions so that we can live according to God's purposes in every dimension. The spiritual dimension guides us so that we can aspire to be healthier mentally, physically, and relationally, even if we live amid conflicts and struggles. (Standish 2005, Kindle 889 of 4886)

A church that exercises the spiritual dimension will guide and integrate the other dimensions so that we can refrain from exercising dominion over other but rather seeking for edification of the others. The church I served at was a place where believers seemed to have a good appetite for spiritual knowledge; however, this was not integrated with the spiritual dimension of their lives. As a pastor who was nurtured in such a culture, I mistakenly made the assumption that intellectual learning equated to spiritual growth. In reality, there was a great gap between these. Standish explains the problem: "Overcoming enslavement to the mental dimension is difficult. It requires training and guiding the leaders and members to put aside their own egos, ambitions, and need for control, and to seek and follow the Spirit" (Kindle 932 of 4886). Similarly, I was also operating from a strong mental dimension; furthermore, my ego led me to adopt a non-compromising spirit when dealing with the accusing party.

My sick leave was extended twice, and it was the longest period I had taken that was due to emotional and spiritual hurt. The picture I now had of this beloved spiritual family was one that was torn apart and each separate group was acting like bitter enemies. A wall was erected, preventing us from serving God together faithfully and wholeheartedly. Peter Scazzero states the following in his blog *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*: “Leadership is sacred, holy work before God. Whether it be leadership of our own lives, our churches, our families or our finances, it is a challenge to mature through the walls and challenges that confront us” (Scazzero 2010). These evoked hindrances are pathways that lead to maturity.

Undergoing a Transformation of the Soul

He says, “Be still, and know that I am God.”
(Psalm 46:10)

During my sick leave, I felt like I had fallen into a dark ditch, or in the words of Thomas Merton:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you... I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire... Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear for you are with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. (Merton 1999, 79)

At this point, I was in need of new insight, new direction, and new hope. Timothy Cardinal Dolan, archbishop of New York, quoted Augustin Guillerand (a French Carthusian monk) in the foreword of Donald Haggerty’s book *Contemplative Provocations*: “Someone wounds our soul with a wound that will never heal, and

it is through that wound that He finds His way to the very center of our being” (Haggerty 2013, Foreword). My desperate need and the lack of a spiritually trustworthy confidant compelled me to put my trust solely in the Lord. During this period of loneliness, I was forced to enter a period of training, a period that was necessary in preparing me to become a true spiritual leader. As Standish emphasizes: “To be a spiritual leader means to be a person of spiritual maturity first, a leader second. And the only path to spiritual maturity is time spent in prayer, study, reflection, solitude, and service” (Standish, 2005, Kindle, 2638 of 4886). I spent three months of this unanticipated Sabbath trying to heal from past hurt through Scripture reading, spiritual friendships, silence and solitude, rest, and physical exercise.

Daily I reflectively read the Psalms. I was shocked that so many passages suddenly looked unfamiliar to me even though I had read them over 10 times. In my vulnerable and needy state, my eyes were opened and I felt deeply touched by the cries of the Psalmist. These words were my spiritual milk and comfort during many a dark and sleepless night. Moreover, while rereading a few emails that I had sent to a spiritual friend, I had shared these words in my devotional sharing: “God speaks so loudly everyday... God knows what is happening... It is unbelievable.” The psalmist begging God to hear his cries struck me:

Hear me, my God, as I voice my complaint; protect my life from the threat of the enemy. Hide me from the conspiracy of the wicked, from the plots of evildoers. They sharpen their tongues like swords and aim cruel words like deadly arrows. They shoot from ambush at the innocent; they shoot suddenly, without fear. They encourage each other in evil plans, they talk about hiding their snares; they say, ‘Who will see it?’ (Psalm 64:1-5)

No words from people could bring more comfort than the words expressed by this psalmist. The message greatly moved me. I felt God's presence as I was reminded that the Almighty and all-knowing God knew what was happening and His words healed the deepest part of my soul. No matter how perfectly people try to plot against me using their worldly wisdom, God would ultimately prevail: "They plot injustice and say, 'We have devised a perfect plan!' Surely the human mind and heart are cunning. But God will shoot them with his arrows; they will suddenly be struck down. He will turn their own tongues against them and bring them to ruin; all who see them will shake their heads in scorn" (Psalm 64:5-8). God's Word promises justice for the unjust acts of humankind.

I was invited to take refuge and rejoice in Him for He is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer (Psalm 64:10, 71:1-3). Each of the psalmist's words seemed to echo my pain of being rebuked, wronged, and humiliated. My deepest cries were like those of the psalmist: "Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of those who are evil and cruel...For my enemies speak against me; those who wait to kill me conspire together. They say, 'God has forsaken him; pursue him and seize him, for no one will rescue him'" (Psalm 71:4, 10). These words also reminded me of the cries of Jesus when he was experiencing the abandonment of his people. In the midst of my pain, I reminded myself of the privilege of sharing in the cup of suffering that Jesus took for undeserving sinners like me and all of humanity. I admire and desire the prayer that St. John of the cross prayed in his prayer of detachment:

Deliver me, O Jesus...
...from the fear of being humiliated
...from the fear of being despised
...from the fear of suffering rebuke
...from the fear of being forgotten
...from the fear of being wronged
...from the fear of being ridiculed

This prayer reflects the beauty of the life of Christ who sought not the absence of being humiliated, despised, or wronged, but the deliverance from fear of these.

The book of Romans speaks powerfully to these fears: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?” (Romans 8:35).

New Journey through Spiritual Companionship and Daily Renewal of Hope from Above

I began to walk even more closely with a few of my Christian friends—we opened ourselves up to one another, listened to each other’s cries, and prayed to God together. It was a new level of companionship, a deep sense of community that I had never tasted before. This contemplative journey of reading, prayer, reflection, solitude, silence, journaling, and spiritual companionship became a process that helped me to listen to the Lord, guiding me to orient myself and discern my next step. As Christensen writes in *Discernment*:

Spiritual Discernment requires us to put our ears to the ground that we may hear the low notes that vibrate for the poor and keep us focused on what is most important—that is, whom God cares most about. Once we hear and heed that deeper sound, we can march to the music we may only faintly hear, however measured or far away. But what if we miss a step, a beat, a note or two? Stop and listen again... “Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.” (Isaiah 30:21) (Nouwen 2013, 178-179)

My experience opened my ears to listen to different channels. Gradually, I was listening to messages from the Bible that I did not hear earlier in my life. After two months, my soul became at peace and I was slowly healing. Psalm 27 depicts well what I was struggling with: fear, as I was seeing ‘enemies’ teaming up to besiege me and go against me, making me “stumble and fall” (Psalm 27: 2). I was invited to “dwell in the house of the Lord” and to “gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock” (Psalm 27:5). The Lord was inviting me to seek his face and to dwell in his sacred tent. He was my source of strength; He made me sing and rejoice again. My knowledge of God was made real in my seeking, praying, silence, solitude, and dwelling in His presence. It was like what Job had concluded after he had undergone unbearable pain and loss: “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you” (Job: 42:5). This is also what Benner emphasizes about how real transformation occurs—only when a deep knowledge of God and self are grounded in experience (Benner 2015, 22).

The Journey: From Desolation to Consolation

Morris and Olsen point out that a decision made according to our feelings may invite shallow and impulsive behavior that lacks sustainability when it is tested with time (Morris and Olsen 2012). They illustrate that the Jesuit model is a helpful discerning tool: “Jesuits use feelings in a more intentional way. They test

a decision by letting it rest near their hearts and by waiting to see if it leads to consolation or to desolation. Does the decision lead them closer to God and result in feelings of peace and wellbeing? Or does it lead away from God and result in feelings of isolation, fear, and distress?” (2012, Kindle 817 of 2496). My unplanned wilderness retreat was definitely a journey: from a place of desolation, in which I was consumed by anger, hurt, and anxiety, to a place of consolation, in which I experienced the power of salvation, protection, joy, and mercy that comes from God.

During my leave, the church conflict continued. When the deacon board felt that they could no longer manage the conflict that was intensifying in the church among some of the pastoral staff, the leaders and the congregation, they sought help from the denominational leaders. A team of two representatives came in to help resolve the conflict by interviewing all the pastors and leaders involved. The process of discernment took place for a month—through emails, interviews, and reviewing of documents. Regarding my case, the report said that the leadership team had been harsh with me and there was proneness toward judgment and a lack of grace and fairness. Despite of the entire ordeal, God invited the entire congregation to renew our faith and love. The denominational leaders urged everyone to renew our relationship with God and with one another. As for me, this is a precious formational wilderness journey in deepening my intimacy with God.

Formational Reflection

Ultimately, God's love and grace shone through in my situation. I witnessed His faithfulness in my helplessness. He is the one who judges: "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay'" (Romans 12:19). Under the Stalin regime in Russia, Communist leaders attempted to eradicate Christianity by exiling many believers and clergymen. In one incident, when Father Arseny, an orthodox priest, along with other prisoners, was confined in a cold room and about to freeze to death, Arseny prayed desperately, and then a miracle happened: "There was a bright light and Father Arseny, dressed in brilliant white vestments, his hands lifted up, was praying aloud...He felt no more anxiety, no more suffering, no more fear, only the desire to become one with these words, to understand them for the rest of his life...He saw God with his soul" (Alexander & Bouteneff 1998, 35). Similarly, God miraculously provided for me by sending the denominational leader as a mediator to handle the conflict. I felt my dark imprisonment was illuminated by the light of this leader's compassion and understanding.

Through this trial, God revealed to me that I had focused too much on the mental dimension of nurturing my relationship with Him—I submerged myself in learning, I attended conferences, and I diligently studied the Bible—but I was not leaving room to allow what I was learning to shape me and to help me grow in my love for God and my discernment of His will. I seem to love the spiritual wisdom and knowledge He gives more than enjoying His loving presence. In my difficult

situation, I wanted a quick fix, and I turned to the rational and relational instead. My inattention to and neglect of the necessary spiritual disciplines—silence, solitude, reflection, and prayer—caused me to rely on my own strategies to cope with my circumstances when I should have been seeking God by dwelling in His presence. The Lord used this trial to draw me close to him and allowed me to hear His sweet voice. My experience echoed that of Lauback, a mystic who practiced communion with God moment by moment, and who was a missionary to the Muslims in the Philippines: “It was the loneliest year, in some ways the hardest year, of my life, but the most gloriously full of voices from heaven” (Lauback 1937, January 3, 1930 entry). That year was a desert experience in which my usual stimulation from applause, voices, scenes, needs, and busyness were cut off, replaced by silence, solitude, tears, heartbreak—and, above all, power from the Word of God that led to peace and healing. Now, I can echo Augustin Guillerand’s quote regarding being a wounded soul that once believed it was incapable of healing but eventually arrived at a place in which God became the very center of my being (Guillerand in Haggerty 2013, Foreword).

Four years after I left the church, at another church where I was speaking for Sunday school, I unexpectedly ran into the former Senior Pastor. I smiled and asked about his health. He was shocked and unprepared to see me there, but we quickly greeted each other. In that moment, my instinctive way of relating to him gave me comfort—it was evidence that my soul was at peace. I had come a long

way in the process of learning to forgive—all because of God’s love. In the words of Nouwen:

Once we discern our identity and accept God’s unconditional love, we are free to live in the world without being owned by the world. We can forgive those who hurt or disappoint us without letting bitterness, jealousy, or resentment enter our hearts. The most beautiful fruit of claiming your belovedness is a joy that allows us to share God’s unconditional love for others. (Nouwen 2013, 135-136)

The painful experience ultimately enabled me to go through the process of learning to let go of a broken relationship and have peace in my soul.

A New Chapter: New Ministry, New Horizon and New Opportunity

But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.
(Isaiah 40:31)

Three months after I resigned from my position, I was offered a pastoral position to lead a local mega-church. I was to serve as a Body Life Pastor where I would train small group leaders and lead the Family and Prime Timer’s Ministry. I accepted the invitation because the senior pastor was one whom I looked up to and wished to learn from. I also believed that this was a generation for the mega-church where there were better resources for ministering to church members as well as to reach out to the community. After a period of waiting, praying with my husband, discerning with my spiritual director and my ladies’ prayer group, and seeking confirmation from Scripture, I accepted the position.

This church provided a new opportunity for me to exercise my gifts in teaching and training of small group leaders. Since it was a large church, my training materials needed to be more systematic and structured and I had compiled a handbook for each course. Although I had been off for several months, my past ministry experience in teaching, preaching, and training enabled me not only to serve without feeling much pressure even in a mega church, but to also remain enthusiastic and vibrant in everything I did. The church had two Cantonese services in the morning, and the noon service was broadcasted on cable TV.

Besides preaching and teaching, I was also training small group leaders in how to lead small groups through my well-developed Fourfold Small Group Leadership Training Curriculum. My ministry scope also involved leading the men's ministry, which involved meeting with the core leaders for direction and planning. My husband was a great help in building a rapport with the team that was working alongside me.

Although my ministry responsibilities were heavy and demanding, I found them manageable. The diverse activities suited my renaissance personality; moreover, I was gradually learning to sharpen all my ministry skills. I did not have difficulty adapting to the demanding role of the Body Life Ministry. However, it was somewhat challenging to adapt to the leadership culture. Experience has taught me that a church can compassionately minister to the poor, new immigrants, and even homeless people, but show less compassion toward its own staff.

Chinese people are typically hard-working, but may unwittingly allow ourselves to become slaves to our work to prove ourselves diligent and faithful workers—at the expense of time with our families. We may also impose this standard of hard work on others. As a result, there are many of us in the church that mean well and work diligently for our Heavenly Father, but may lack an intimate relationship with Him. As servants of Christ, we must remember, however, that our God is a gracious God who does not enslave us but liberates and redeems us from enslavement. While dedicating ourselves wholeheartedly to ministry, it is important for us, pastors, to exercise self-care, remembering that our God is gracious and merciful.

In retrospect, I have found that I consistently voice out my concerns when I feel caught in a dilemma in which I observe a neglect of authenticity, justice, and integrity in ministry management. However, my assertive actions have given me the reputation of being insubordinate, which casts me as an opponent of the parties involved. In one of his blog articles, China Mike offers his lay wisdom that speaks to the actions of someone like me:

In fact, making someone lose face can sometimes insult someone so deeply to create an enemy for life. Indeed, revenge is very much part of the equation—and not just on Chinese soap operas, which include a heavy dose of avenging face—losing situations. I think it's safe to say that throughout China's long history, face has started many unnecessary conflicts. (China Mike, 2011)

Dallas Willard makes observations that illustrate well why people who are engaged in ministerial work actively can remain untransformed:

Indeed, solitude and silence are powerful means of grace. Bible study, prayer and church attendance, among the most commonly prescribed activities in Christian circles, generally have little effect for soul transformation, as is obvious to any observer. If all the people doing them were transformed to health and righteousness by it, the world would be vastly changed. Their failure to bring about the change is precisely because the body and soul are so exhausted, fragmented and conflicted that the prescribed activities cannot be appropriately engaged, and by the large degenerate into legalistic and ineffectual rituals. Lengthy solitude and silence, including rest, can make them very powerful. (Willard 2006, 107)

Willard's words make sense of my bewilderment as I witness a lack of deep inner transformation in the lives many Christian leaders (including myself), even though we know the Bible so well and serve so fervently in their church. China Mike recommends taking John Wayne's acting advice: "'Talk low, talk slow, and don't talk too much.' Pretend that you're trying to feed a nut to a nervous squirrel—approach at an angle, don't attract too much attention and no sudden moves" (China Mike, 2011). Interpreting these words spiritually, I believe my experiences have taught me to be humble and meek when raising a question. I have learned to practice greater discernment, and I have developed a stronger interest in the area of spiritual formation, which I believe is instrumental in handling and resolving the issues of face existing in Chinese churches.

A Stepping Stone in the Discernment Process

Feeling drawn to minister to Christians and leaders desiring to experience a deeper spiritual life, I prayed to God to open a door for me that enabled me to spend more of my time teaching, preaching, providing mentoring and spiritual direction, and leading retreats.

Then an incident occurred that led me to the decision to leave this church. It was an experience that very much resonates that of Nouwen at the time of his departure from Harvard:

My movement from Harvard to L'Arche made me aware of how much my own thinking had been affected by the desire to be relevant, popular, and powerful...He asks us to move from a concern for relevance to a life of prayer, from worries about popularity to communal and mutual ministry, and from a leadership built on power to a leadership in which we critically discern where God is leading us. (Nouwen, 2013, 159)

During my last month at the church, I was approached by the director of Alliance Bible Seminary who invited me to consider teaching my Fourfold Small Group Leadership Training Curriculum. He was made aware of my training courses by a member of my church. After the discussion, we promised to connect again in two months when I returned from my mission trip to Burma. The time away provided a chance for both of us to discern the Lord's guidance. The invitation was like an answer to my prayer. The door seemed to have gradually opened. Meanwhile, my call to provide spiritual direction and spiritual formation retreats grew stronger. About six months later, I started a new ministry, the Holistic Sanctuary (www.holistisancutary.ca). It is a ministry that aims to offer a sanctuary for Christians to experience intimacy with God through spiritual direction, coaching, mentoring, and retreats and spiritual formation curriculum. Meanwhile, three mentors encouraged me to consider taking a Doctorate of Ministry. I could see that this was also an answer to prayer as I had a deep desire to keep growing and learning in the area of spiritual formation. Meanwhile, I prayerfully hoped that my learning, unique pastoral experiences, and spiritual

formation projects would serve as a blessing for the greater Christian community and contribute to a new culture—both locally and globally—as believers learned to incorporate the spiritual disciplines and come to an understanding of holistic ministry.

Throughout this entire journey, I have witnessed how the Lord has been my shepherd, continually leading me and protecting me. I have enjoyed His abundance and can utter the same words as the psalmist in Psalm 65:1: “You crown the year with your bounty, and your carts overflow with abundance.” Seeing and tasting the blessing in each phase of my life, I can truly proclaim the truth that is written in the book of Isaiah: “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:9).

CHAPTER 3:
A HOLISTIC SPIRITUAL FORMATION
MODEL FOR SELECTED CHINESE
EVANGELICAL CHURCHES

This chapter includes four major parts. First, it begins with observations based on my past eighteen years of experience in pastoral ministry (fourteen years in local churches), which is then followed by summaries of interviews with four local pastors and a presentation by Milton Wan on Chinese spirituality. Together, these provide the context for a representative segment of Chinese evangelical churches in the Greater Toronto Area, specifically, North York, Scarborough, Markham, and Richmond Hill. Second, it shows the data gathered and how this data has contributed to the development of a holistic spiritual formation model. Third, it explains how I use part of the model to develop an applicational approaches of experiential and contemplative spirituality. The last part focuses on specific spiritual practices applied in the daily life of Chinese Christians of the mentioned churches.

Part One: My Ministry Experience and Observations from Other Pastors

I have gathered observations from my previous fourteen years of pastoring in different Cantonese-speaking Chinese churches in the Greater Toronto Area (G.T.A.), specifically Markham and Richmond Hill. I often witnessed co-workers and other ministry leaders overburdened by their workload. They frequently worked fifty to sixty hours a week. Many suffered from exhaustion, burnout and depression as well as other issues. Although the Church is a spiritual organism, and our goal as pastors is to focus on discipleship and evangelism, many of us did not focus our efforts toward cultivating spiritual transformation. Rather, planning, goal setting, ministry meetings, programs and events seemed to occupy the discussion and agenda. Since most pastors have little clue about how to measure the effectiveness of spiritual growth, the first agenda item of the weekly pastoral meeting was the weekly attendance and the amount of tithing. These two numerical data seemed to be the most relevant measurements for gauging spiritual health.

I noticed that the Sunday service sermon was typically viewed as the main event, and adult Sunday school and seminars were seen as the main instruments for nurturing discipleship. In the recent decade, overseas-missions and local community services have also become significant components of discipleship. In these churches, I began to sense a common approach to developing spirituality: a two-pronged approach of feeding the intellect and encouraging participation in church ministries.

In addition, I have gained much insight into some Chinese evangelicals in the G.T.A through my ministry as a spiritual director to Chinese congregants, leaders and pastors. I once had a directee who epitomized the Chinese evangelical ideal of a mature and spiritual disciple of Christ. Not only did he attend Sunday worship and church fellowship regularly, but also attended church prayer meetings, taught Sunday school, mentored young people and was a committee member. Furthermore, he was also in seminary for training, so that he could eventually go on missions, taking time off work to do so. However, when asked in a spiritual exercise to choose an object to represent his inner spiritual condition, he picked a dry and withered leaf. Furthermore, I was curious if other pastors in the Chinese evangelical circle (G.T.A.) shared similar experiences so I interviewed six pastors. Surprisingly, they had similar findings. I have chosen to report on only four of those interviews below due to redundancy.

Interviews of Pastors

The following section summarizes my interviews with four pastors who have been in ministry between ten and thirty-two years. I have received permission to conduct the following pastoral interviews as well as to have the content of the interviews published (see Appendix B). I was taken by surprise to find that, though we served in different Chinese churches, our experiences were quite similar. They helped to paint a clearer picture, for me, of the spiritual climate in some of our Chinese evangelical churches in the G.T.A. I felt

confirmed in my concerns that we were devolving into a religious culture of merely “knowing information” and “doing outwardly-religious activities,” quantified by human measurements of success. My only question was: What are your observations of the spiritual health and spiritual growth model of your church and of churches as a whole among the Cantonese-speaking Chinese churches in the G.T.A.?

Samuel Or

Or, pastor of Grace Gospel Church of North York, expressed pastors were too busy getting their pastoral duties done. He shared that there was neither joy nor power in his own pastoral work. He said, “I did not even believe what I taught because the people I served have remained so unchanged.” He shared his belief that churches in general have not focused on spiritual growth because we depend too much upon measurements for success, and those measurements tend to be numerical, such as numbers of new converts, numbers of new small groups, numbers of people visited, and the number of mission teams sent. In other words, he noticed too much focus on setting goals and on quantifiable numbers to define our ministry effectiveness and success.

Edward Ho

Ho is currently an Interim Senior Pastor at Markham Chinese Baptist Church. His observations in Cantonese-speaking churches in general were that people tended to equate having biblical knowledge with being spiritual. Ho also

observed that since Chinese people are (culturally) concerned with “face”—the preservation of one’s dignity and public image in a social context—it is more challenging to be vulnerable by sharing one’s inner spiritual life or struggles, in fear of losing face, not only for themselves, but also their family as a whole. It has proved to be a great hindrance for spiritual growth among the Chinese. Thus, most people in the Chinese church revert to pursuing spirituality, or at least the image of spirituality, through busy involvement in church events (intellectual and service-related) in order to uphold an image.

Kelvin Luong

Luong, lead pastor of the Cantonese Chinese congregation at Hallelujah Chinese Evangelical Free Church, noted that Chinese culture does not promote or encourage expressing one’s feelings, and tends to be more reserved when expressing one’s emotions, even opting to minimize, if not ignore, it. We understand “love” as a command and approach it with a “just-do-it” pragmatism, placing great focus on our service and participation of activities. However, Luong says, ignoring inner feelings makes it difficult for a person to mature spiritually since the emotions are so integral to being human. Thus, the Chinese Christian’s spirituality is challenged from the start, due to a heritage deficient in inner cohesiveness and expression of one’s affective parts.

In addition, Luong deduced that due to the fact that most Chinese churches are composed of immigrants, they are not as likely to take risks or make changes;

but rather, they tend to follow church models familiar to them before immigrating to Canada. As a result, most of the Chinese churches in Canada are formatted and structured by the models of the 1980s or 1990s where reasoning and knowledge were more predominant among the Chinese churches in Hong Kong. Furthermore, the aforementioned population tends to dominate since they are the older generation (in a culture defined by respecting elders) and there are more of them (since immigration was higher during that period of time). As a result of this, there has not been much breakthrough in accommodating the needs of the younger believers of a changed world: one that highly values feelings, experiences and relevancy.

Raymond Cheng

Cheng is currently a pastor at East Toronto Chinese Baptist Church. He noted the Chinese church's spiritual model emphasizes relating to God through informational knowledge (as opposed to relational knowing). This approach stresses the use of the mind through rationale, words and ideas. Cheng agrees most Chinese churches put much emphasis on teaching ministry, such as Adult Sunday School, seminars, and Christian conferences. In the recent decades, however, Chinese churches have started to focus a lot on social services as well. Cheng shared how his own church serves as a "community centre" in a large community centre hub, and provides services and resources to help individuals in the community.

According to their personal experiences, based on the pastors' observations of the Chinese churches, some common themes emerge. Chinese churches tend to focus on equipping believers with knowledge, measuring growth through programs and events, avoiding the discussion of any issues concerning "face", and participating heavily in church activities that focus on outreach. In response to this, we will take a look at the situation from an academic perspective by turning to the well-known speaker among Chinese churches, Milton Wan.

Observations from Milton Wan's Seminar on Chinese Spirituality

On September 23, 2017, New York Theological Education Center held a theological seminar day camp, Reflections of Historical Spirituality and Theology, and invited Dr. Milton Wan to address various topics including Bible and Spirituality, Catholic Spirituality, Orthodox Contemplative Spirituality, and Protestant's Return, Renewal and Integration. Besides being a respected and popular scholar and speaker among Chinese evangelical churches on Christianity Spirituality, Wan is also a former professor at Tyndale University College & Seminary, and presently an honorary retired professor of The Chinese University in Hong Kong. In his presentation, he explained Protestant spirituality at length, and how it shaped the traditions of Chinese evangelical. In the seminar, "Protestant's Return, Renewal and Integration," Wan explained that after the Reformation, we put a strong emphasis on the value of the Bible. Through the process of avoiding "wrong" interpretation of the Bible, we have come to stress

the significance of interpreting the Bible correctly, for example, the inductive bible study approach which aims to know the context, interpretation, and application of the text. He explained, there is nothing wrong in using this approach in understanding the Bible. However, we inevitably fall into the danger of engaging with the Bible rationally in our attempt to understanding Scripture. Our relationship with God becomes “impersonalized when we focus on analysing the Bible.” As a result of this, Protestant spirituality has its drawbacks: our devotional life “become superficial and shallow.” He continued, “We are not getting the ‘strength and the transformation in our life.’ When our spirituality is grounded in rationalism, we become shallow in our inner life journey. We find it difficult to articulate our experiences in God; we fall into the pit of “moralism” - to use our outward behavior as expressions of piety.” Wan explained that Protestants see God as supreme and sovereign. Thus, we believe, to be good children of God is to obey Him. In this form of spirituality, Wan said that we are characterized by a sense of distance and fear in our relationship to God, characteristic of relationships with a traditional Chinese father figure. In obeying God, we serve Him in ministries and we share the gospel. We try to justify ourselves morally by being a good Christian.

Wan continued to illustrate the drawbacks of these cognitive and moralistic approaches to God. He explained that when our inner spiritual journey and our pursuit of God gradually turn into moralistic compliance, we focus on our “work” and “doing” and they become our core and guide for being good

Christians. The core is no longer the gospel, hindering the actual pursuit of God Himself. It is not like Catholic spirituality which aims for union of God, like marriage. Instead, our Chinese evangelical spirituality is like a “merry-go-around, all the movement is centred around the same location.” We focus on salvation, grace and sin, repeatedly, and those become the core of our spirituality; and we dare not explore mystical spirituality that the Bible is not explicit about. Wan’s striking presentation of his understanding of the Chinese evangelical Christian context resonated in many of our hearts.

I discovered that Wan’s historical review and observations summarized the four interviewees presented above. I found much evidence supporting my observations of the churches (despite that they were not grounded on actual systematic sociological surveys of Chinese evangelical churches) through personal experience and dialogue with the interviewees: that is, these churches tend to overemphasize the importance of knowledge acquirement and outward service for spiritual development. Furthermore, it does so at the expense of and peril of ignoring other vital aspects, such as reflection, meditation, silence and solitude or Sabbath, which are critical for facilitating a holistic spiritual life. The following part attempts to provide a holistic spiritual formation model that aims to complement the current emphasis on equipping believers with biblical knowledge and involving them in ministry and mission work.

Types of Christian Spirituality Helpful to the Interviewed Evangelical Chinese Churches in the GTA

According to Urban Holmes' *A History of Christian Spirituality* (Holmes 2002), we all lean toward certain approaches of living out our spirituality. Holmes uses a circle to represent the wholeness and unity of the multiple types of spirituality that interact together to facilitate healthy spirituality. He names it the "Circle of Sensibility" (Holmes 2002, 4). Holmes adopts the word *sensibility* to call our attention to become aware of and sensitive to our tendencies toward particular styles of prayer, meditation or certain spiritual practices. Furthermore, he reminds us that the spiritual path we choose is also influenced by our avoiding other spiritual practices, whether out of unfamiliarity or undesirability. Holmes classifies four different approaches to spirituality: rationalism, pietism, quietism, and encratism; these are derived from the horizontal and vertical axes in his "Circle of Sensibility" graph as shown below:

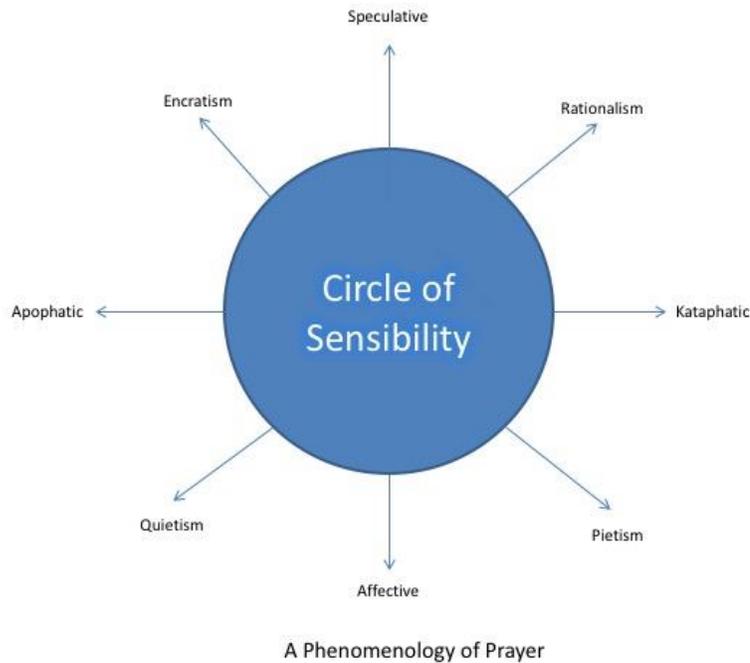


Figure 1: A Phenomenology of Prayer, Urban T. Holmes (Holmes 2002, 4).

The vertical axis of the circle, from top to bottom, is labeled as speculative and affective, respectively. This scale measures one’s tendency of either emphasizing “the illumination of the mind (speculative) or the heart or emotions (affective)” (Holmes 2002, 4). We will follow Boa and substitute speculative with mind (to know God), and affective (to sense God) with heart in referring to a person’s nurturing relationship with God, ranging from “purely cognitive and speculative illumination of the mind at one end of the spectrum to purely affective and emotion illumination of the heart at the opposite end of the spectrum” (Boa 2001, 468). The horizontal axis, from left to right, is labeled “apophatic” and “kataphatic”. The term “apophatic” is derived from a Greek word that means

“negative”. In Holmes’s schema, it refers to one’s tendency of adopting the “ascetical method that advocates an emptying (apophatic) technique” (Holmes 2002, 4) in spiritual matters. Corinne Ware describes it as “the tendency of a person or a discipline to think of God in non-concretized ways; that is, to think of God as *mystery*” (Ware 1995, 32). Ken Boa, in his book, *Conformed to His Image*, observes that the apophatic approach of spirituality is more characteristic of the disciplines of the East, which “stresses God’s transcendence and mystery” (Boa 2001, 486). According to Boa, “mysticism refer to a personal apprehension of the transcendent and ultimate Being” (Boa 2001, 485). It is a perception or an experience of God beyond the realm of ordinary description. Carl McColman in his book *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism* explains, “Mystical experience opens you up to the love of God, yet forces you to give up all your limited ideas and concepts about God, discarding them all as mere mental idols. The deeper you go, the more elusive God becomes” (McColman 2010, 8). It is a divine reality beyond ordinary apprehension. The apophatic approach of spirituality draws a contrast between “[the] kataphatic style of spirituality [which] uses symbols, images, and metaphors while an apophatic style emphasizes God’s hiddenness” (Boa 2001, 468). The term *kataphatic* is derived from a Greek word that denotes “affirmative,” and it refers to the approach of knowing God in affirmation. It emphasizes the knowledge of God through his general and special revelation. It is the traditional Western approach to knowing God through reasoning and concreteness. The apophatic style of spirituality seeks to know and sense the

hidden or mystical God while the kataphatic style of spirituality seeks to know and sense “the revealed God” (Boa 2001, 469). With both axes, people tend to lean towards one approach (as opposed to balancing both) when pursuing intimacy with God.

**Part Two: A Holistic Spiritual Formation Model:
The Four Types of Christian Spirituality for the
Interviewed Evangelical Chinese Churches**

Part two in this section presents a holistic spiritual model, including approaches to spirituality that are somewhat developed in the Chinese churches interviewed but still need to be cultivated. Four different quadrants outlining four types of Christian spirituality emerge out of the intersecting axes of mind-heart and apophatic-kataphic: kataphatic-mind, kataphatic-heart, apophatic-heart or apophatic-mind. They are respectively referred to in this model as *cognitive spirituality* (type 1), *experiential spirituality* (type 2), *contemplative spirituality* (type 3) and *societal regeneration spirituality* (type 4) as shown in Figure 2 below:

A Holistic Christian Spiritual Formation Model

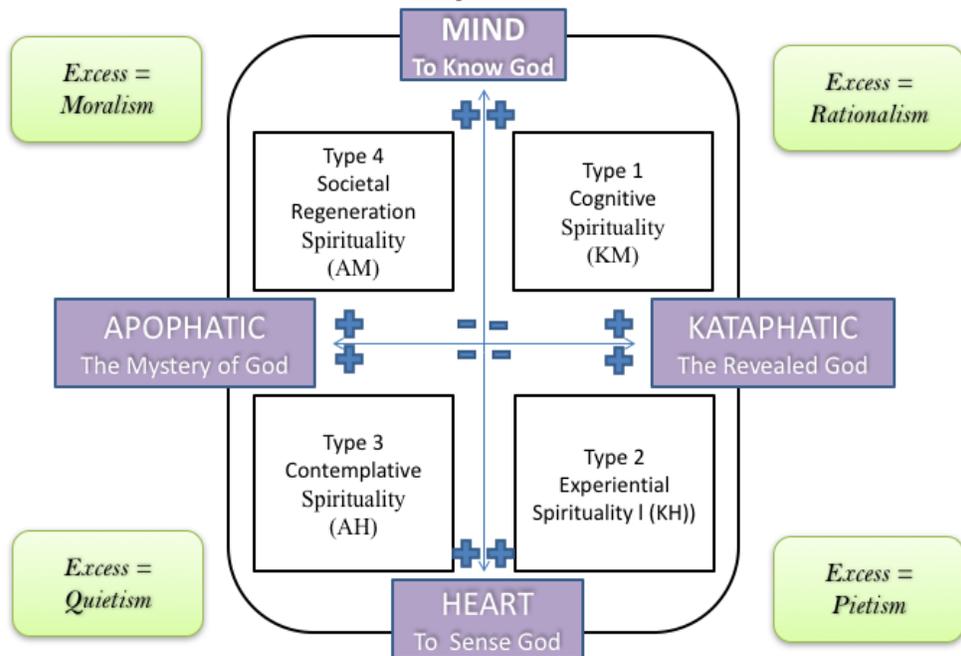


Figure 2. A Holistic Christian Spiritual Formation Model, based on “Circle of Sensibility” from Urban T. Holmes (Holmes 2002, 4) & “Types of Christian Spirituality from Ken Boa (Boa 2001, 469).

The top-right quadrant blends kataphatic-mind. This first quadrant, called cognitive spirituality (type 1), stresses the mind’s role and the fact that God is revealed (Boa 2001, 469). It is an intellectual spirituality that engages the mind to know the knowable God. Experiential spirituality (type 2), found in the bottom-right, blends kataphatic-heart. This second quadrant represents the heart’s dominating role in the pursuit to know the knowable God. Contemplative spirituality (type 3), blends apophatic-heart and engages with the God of mystery through solitude, listening, silence and emptying prayer. Finally, the fourth quadrant found in the top-left combines apophatic-mind and stirs up the moralistic

or missional heart in Christians. This is labelled as societal regeneration spirituality (type 4).

In Sheldrake's book that discusses types of spirituality, he emphasizes that it is significant for each type of spirituality to address the following questions (Sheldrake 2013, 16):

1. Where is transformation thought to take place (context)?
2. How does it take place (means)?
3. What is its ultimate purpose (goal)?

For each type of spirituality, we will attempt to answer these three questions (below).

Type 1: Cognitive Spirituality (Kataphatic-Mind)

The goal of cognitive spirituality is theological renewal (Boa 2001, 460). In this quadrant, God is revealed, and one seeks to understand him primarily with the mind. Cognitive spirituality encourages spiritual nurturing through learning and education. It focuses on rational engagement with biblical truth. According to Ware, its expression is also strongly based on "activity and on corporate gathering: more study groups, better sermons, and some sort of theological renewal within the worshipping community" (Ware 1995, 37). Martin Luther and John Calvin of the Reformation Period are some of the best examples of the first quadrant (Boa 2001, 470). Holmes explains that an excessive development in this quadrant leads to rationalism, "an overly dogmatic emphasis that stresses logic to

the exclusion of mystery and propositional truth over again personal response” (Holme in Boa 2001, 470).

Based on the interviews discussed before, and from personal observations made in Chinese evangelical congregations in the G.T.A., we are able to answer Sheldrake’s questions as follows: The goal of becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ is sought in the context of church or conferences. The practices and disciplines through which transformation are thought to take place are through attending programs and events such as Sunday school, Sunday sermons, seminars, and small group bible study. It is summarized in Figure 3 below:

Type 1: Cognitive Spirituality

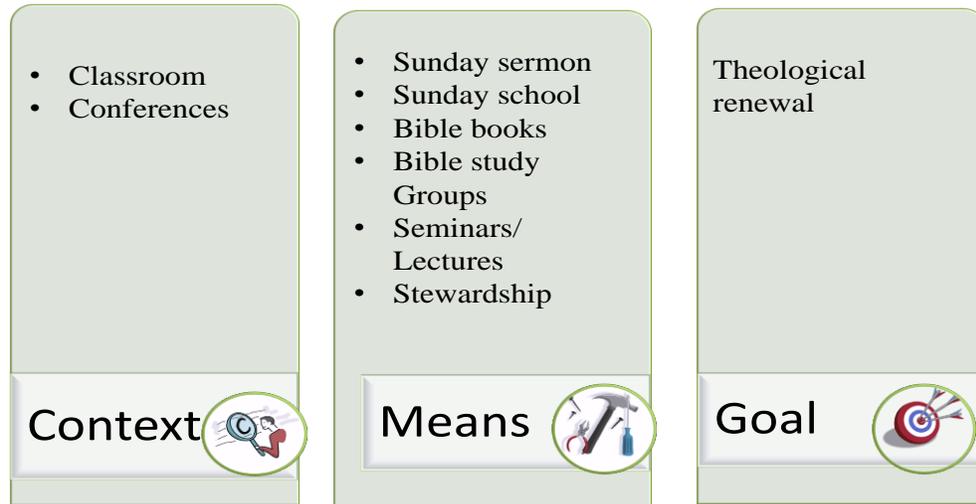


Figure 3. Type 1: Cognitive Spirituality, based on “Circle of Sensibility” from Urban T. Holmes (Holmes 2002, 4) & “Types of Christian Spirituality from Ken Boa (Boa 2001, 469).

In the video *Willow Creek Says the Church is Failing*, Greg Hawkins, executive pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, says that the way they once thought of doing church was by getting folks to engage in activities. They had the illusion that the higher the participation from the folks, the more they would produce disciples of Christ” (Hawkins, Greg 2011). This description is very similar to the mindset of the Chinese evangelical churches’ model in addressing the three fundamental questions raised by Sheldrake mentioned above.

Indisputably, strong emphasis on biblical education is vital to faith and has significantly helped Chinese evangelical believers establish a strong foundation in their faith. According to Fenggang Yang, in his book, *Chinese Christians in*

American, he finds that most Chinese churches of the major cities were founded by Chinese immigrants themselves (Yang 1999, 6). During the period of late 1950s and early 1960, Chinese students (mainly from Taiwan and Hong Kong) studying in America founded many Bible study groups (BSG) on campus. Those BSGs later evolved into churches as these visa students become permanent residents. Based on Yang's research among the Chinese Churches in the Greater Washington area, he found that "contemporary Chinese churches in America have general characteristics: theological conservatism and organisational independence" (Yang 1999, 6). According to his study, about half of all Chinese churches have no affiliation with American denominations. Yang's study found that the largest group of Chinese churches belongs to the Southern Baptist Convention and the second largest is the Chinese and Missionary Alliance (Yang 1999, 7). This observation reflects my personal experience of serving ten years in two different Baptist churches in the Greater Toronto Area. Baptist churches have a reputation of emphasizing Sunday school and strong Bible teaching. These are typically emphasized in type 1 spirituality and there are both strengths and drawbacks. As Ware says, "The contribution of type 1 spirituality to the whole is invaluable. This style produces theological reflection and crafts position papers on ethical issues. It supports education and publication and causes us to examine the texts of our hymns to see if we are singing what we actually believe." (Ware 1995, 38). Based on my observations, most Chinese churches also have these strengths: they are able to help believers build a strong foundation for their faith

and theological understanding. This is typically done through solid exegetical sermons, systematically-designed adult Sunday school classes, special seminars on spiritual issues, and Bible studies in fellowship and small groups. On the other hand, if all cognitive learning and education are merely “head trips,” it becomes difficult for people in this quadrant to experience growth in their spirituality. Ware explains, “Growth for such people lies in their gradually sensing their interior connection with God” (Ware 1995, 38). It is a journey of stretching the self through experience, otherwise, spirituality will be perceived as dry.

Though cognitive spirituality is necessary for equipping believers with fuller and fuller knowledge of God, it cannot help believers experience an intimate relationship with God on its own, nor transformation into His likeness. Exploring the opposite spirituality would widen the dimensions of any spirituality, increasing the probability of a fuller spiritual life. Holmes’ schema, then, provides a starting point for the quest to offset the over-intellectualism of Chinese evangelical spirituality found in churches in the G.T.A.

Type 2: Experiential Spirituality (Kataphatic Heart)

In experiential spirituality, the revealed God is sought with the heart. Type 2 spirituality aims to “achieve holiness of life” (Ware 1995, 39). The goal is that of personal renewal. It strongly encourages the sharing of inner life experiences and the transformation of self through relationships with soul friends, communal

life or spiritual practices that facilitate deepening and intimate experiences of God.

While kataphatic-mind spirituality is occupied by the purity of doctrine, kataphatic-heart is concerned with the degree of one's intimacy and walk with the Lord. Spiritual practices include witness, testimony, and spontaneous prayer (rather than formal ones typically used in type 1 spirituality). Experiential spirituality seeks to encounter God through spiritual illumination through accountable community. For example, John Wesley created a set of questions to encourage accountability in people's spiritual lives. The following questions were shared at each meeting: "*What known sins have you committed since our last meeting? What temptations have you met with? How were you delivered? What have you thought, said or done, of which you doubt whether it is sin or not?*" (Maas & O'Donnell 1990, 314). These reflective questions encourage individuals to pursue holiness by reflecting upon their lives within small communal environments. Advocates of personal renewal include: St. Benedict, the Puritan writers (such as Richard Baxter), and Charles Wesley (Boa 2001, 479). Holmes describes that extreme type 2 spirituality can lead to pietis, which tends to focus too much on holiness, resulting in an antagonistic relationship to the world. There is also concern for excessive emotionalism in the pursuit of affective experiences (Holmes 2002, 4-5). It is summarized in Figure 4 below:

Type 2: Experiential Spirituality

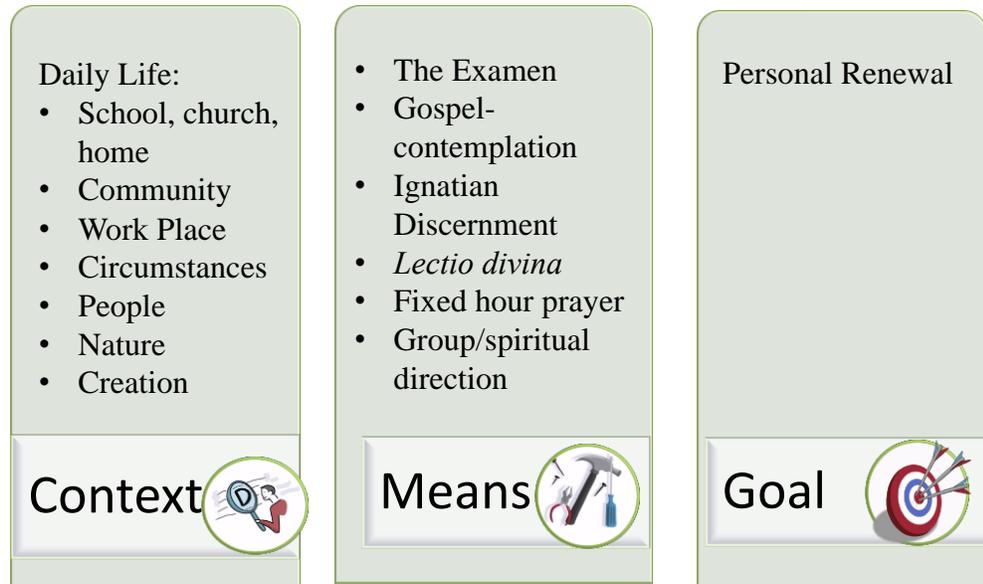


Figure 4. Type 2: Experiential Spirituality, based on “Circle of Sensibility” from Urban T. Holmes (Holmes 2002, 4) & “Types of Christian Spirituality from Ken Boa (Boa 2001, 469).

Whenever I present the spiritual model in adult Sunday school classes in different churches, summer retreats, spiritual formation retreats, and even this portfolio to a group of pastors and church leaders, there is a general consensus that this quadrant is what most Chinese evangelical churches neglect. Chinese evangelical churches in the G.T.A. are better equipped with type 1 spiritual practices, such as Bible study-centered events and programs, but are less equipped for sharing type 2 personal experiences. As Ho mentioned, there is great concern of losing face. Ho said, “Pursuing spirituality through busy involvement in church events (those that are intellectual and service-related) is safer.” In addition, most

small group meetings focus on Bible studies (led by the inductive bible study approach) that focus on facts, interpretation and application. This focus limits opportunities to nurture and encourage the practice of what David Benner calls “soulful spirituality.” In his book, *Soulful Spirituality*, he explains that soulful spirituality channels our vitality in a way that integrates and orients us toward the transcendent. It guides our response to our deepest longing and provides the framework within which our life becomes meaningful (Benner 2011, 52). Benner further explains its significant relationship between spirituality and experience: “It is a way of living that orients the individual toward life as it is encountered in their body and in the flow of their lived experience” (Benner 2011, 51). Only through such “lived experience” in our spiritual journey, do we become “deeply and authentically” human (Benner 2011, 52). Thus, it is important that Chinese evangelical churches gradually steer its focus from the traditional approaches of cognitively-grounded discipleship to also embrace spirituality that facilitates the processing of spiritual knowledge and experiencing vulnerability. There are many applications, such as soul friends, spiritual direction, group spiritual direction, mentoring, life-reviewing groups and accountability groups, that are meant to cultivate experiential spirituality in corporate and small group environments. These means are meant to help process our lives in safe and relational settings that promote reflection and vulnerability for the sake of personal renewal.

Type 3: Contemplative Spirituality (Apophatic-Heart)

Type 3 is classified as contemplative spirituality and is oriented towards the apophatic-heart. The goal is to focus on the inner life journey of the individual. In this quadrant, it encourages the pursuit of an inward awareness of the presence of God through solitude, contemplation and other spiritual disciplines that facilitate emptying for a spirit of presence. Peter Scazzero illustrates that Mary and Martha represent two approaches to spirituality in the Christian life. In her busy-ness, Martha misses Jesus. She is fragmented and distracted (Scazzero 2006, 49). On the other hand, Mary is at the feet of Jesus. “She is ‘being’ with Jesus, enjoying intimacy with him, loving him, attentive, open, quiet, taking pleasure in his presence. She is engaged in what we will call the contemplative life” (Scazzero 2006, 49). Thus, prayer in this quadrant is *hearing from* God rather than *speaking to* God. Sheldrake labels type 3 spirituality as “ascetical-monastic” spirituality and prescribes the wilderness or the monastery as the context where transformation takes place. It involves practicing self-denial and abstaining from the comforts of worldly pleasures. It is a significant path towards spiritual growth (Sheldrake 2013, 15). It calls us to embrace simplicity as a way of life because simplicity helps to quiet external distractions and enables us to fully attend to the voices of the soul (Ware 1995, 41).

Asceticism comes from the Greek word *áskēsis*, training or exercise—an athletic motif. Sheldrake states, “Asceticism takes the body with seriousness, understanding it to be a vital element of spiritual progress in need of proper

ordering. The goal of such discipline is to help us live a more focused rather than fragmented life (Sheldrake 2013, 54). It can be summarized in Figure 3 below:

Type 3: Contemplative Spirituality

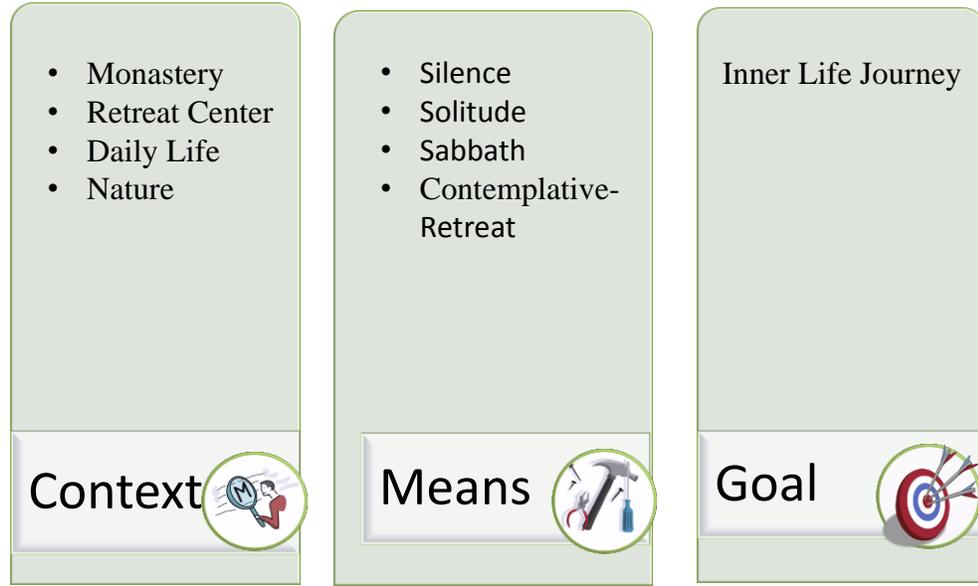


Figure 5. Type 3: Contemplative Spirituality, based on “Circle of Sensibility” from Urban T. Holmes (Holmes 2002, 4) & “Types of Christian Spirituality from Ken Boa (Boa 2001, 469).

In the Gospel of Luke, solitude and ministry were both shown to be integral to Jesus' life. Luke noted the connection between Jesus' retreat into prayerful solitude prior to ministering and speaking. Luke described, “But the news about Him was spreading even farther, and large crowds were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray” (Luke 5:15-16). After ministering to the crowd, Jesus never failed to forget his solitary moments with God. Scripture states,

“After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone” (Matthew 4:23). Jesus also set apart the beginning of the day in solitude and prayer. Mark describes, “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed” (Mark 1:35). Jesus, himself, demonstrated that silence, solitude and retreating into the wilderness to spend time with his Father did not compromise a full life with God, but was the very source for living such a missional life.

Type 3 spirituality appeals to those who are naturally more introspective and intuitive. They are more apt to emotionally connect with the mysteries of God. For those whose preference is the opposite, i.e., Type 1, a sense of tension inevitable arises with attempts of nurturing an integrated spiritual life. Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Merton are good representatives of this quadrant. Job, the figure for whom the Book of Job is named, is a good biblical portrait of this quadrant. In all his searching for an explanation of his suffering, God’s responses are rather apophatic than kataphatic, mystical rather than analytical. In 38:1-7, it says:

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said, ‘Who is this that darkens counsel. By words without knowledge?... “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding, who set its measurements? Since you know. Or who stretched the line on it? “On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” (Job 38:1-7, NASB)

God speaks about the wonders of the world that He has created. He formed the earth and set its order; and, He continues to keep the boundary of the oceans and govern the stars. These are all mysteries beyond human comprehension. Taken too far, the practice of contemplative spirituality could lead to “quietism,” which is a lack of social interaction with the external world, depriving the believer of the blessings of communal life, and the local church of the believer.

Contemplative spirituality may be unfamiliar and uncommon to the majority of (the representative) Chinese evangelical Christians, since so much of their spiritual formation happens in gatherings of believers: seminars, Sunday schools, worship services, and fellowships. My personal observations are that solitude and silence tend not to be taught. It is what Susan Johnson, in her book, *Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom*, calls, “null curriculum,” which refers to an explicit curriculum that does not exist. Nevertheless, its teaching can be implicit. Johnson points out, “Protestants are woefully out of touch with the riches of the classic spiritual tradition” (Johnson 1989, 134). In Peter Gillquist’s book, *Home Coming: Why Protestant Clergy are Becoming Orthodox*, Father Thomas Renfree testifies: In all my years of seminary I don’t recall ever hearing anything good said about Holy Tradition. I now believe this is the glaring omission in evangelical seminary education...they have effectively denied the vital role of godly tradition in the formation and transformation of the Holy Scriptures themselves (Gillquist 1995, 56). This is

quite true for the Chinese evangelical churches interviewed for this paper; in my fourteen years of pastoral ministry in the local churches, and the thirty years I have been a Christian, I have never experienced Sunday school curriculum that taught this kind of spirituality.

Type 4: Societal Regeneration Spirituality (Apophatic-Mind)

Type 4 spirituality leans toward the mystical aspect of God but is coupled with “an intellectual mode of gathering data, [making] for an active visionary who is single-minded with a deeply focused, almost crusading, type of spirituality” (Ware 1995, 43). This type of spirituality is concerned about bringing the kingdom of God to the world, pursuing it through social transformation and social justice. It emerged out of the need for a response from the church, to action and service, regarding social and political issues.

Type 4 spirituality is the participation of God’s redemptive work through action and service, bringing the kingdom of God to the world. The Old Testament teaches us to love our neighbours as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18), and is also reaffirmed by Jesus in Matthew 22 as the second greatest commandment. The Mosaic Law requires social justice in the various aspects of daily life. One example comes from Leviticus 19:34: The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. In the book of Isaiah, the prophet teaches the practice of justice, caring for the needy and the oppressed (Isaiah 1:17). Our deeds and

action in society are inseparable from an authentic spiritual life that brings the kingdom of God to daily life.

In the New Testament, Jesus says when one feeds the hungry, gives water to the thirsty, visits the stranger, clothes the naked, and visits the prisoner, that person is serving his kingdom.

Societal regeneration spirituality expresses the redemptive power of the gospel in our relationship to the world. It is embodied in people such as Mother Teresa who served the poorest of the poor in India; Martin Luther King Jr., the Baptist minister and civil-rights activist who combatted racial inequality in the United States; and, Ralph Nader, a Greek Orthodox Christian, who currently engages in political activism and consumer advocacy. Another expression of societal regeneration spirituality is good stewardship in caring for our environment and God's creation. It can be summarized in Figure 6 below:

Type 4: Societal Regeneration Spirituality

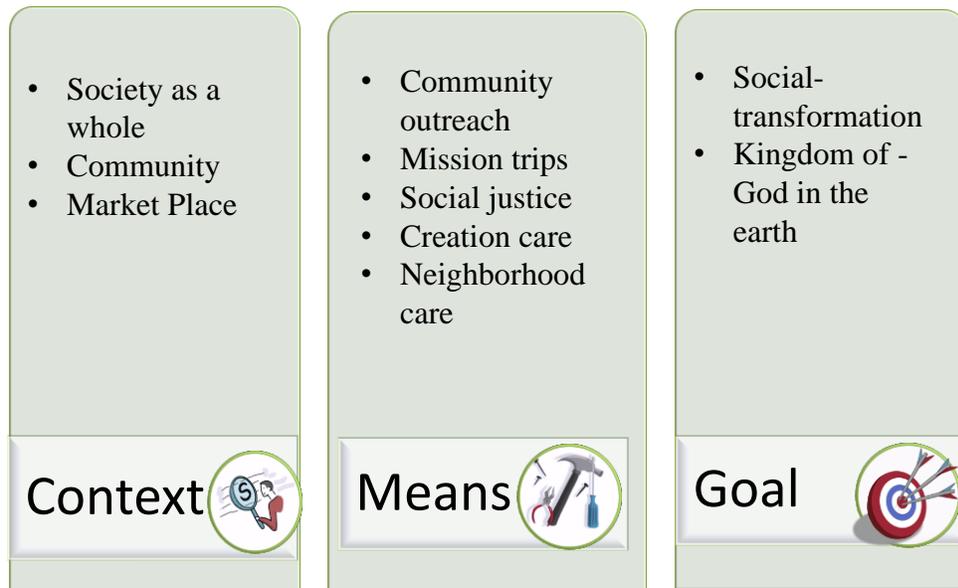


Figure 6. Type 4: Societal Regeneration Spirituality, based on “Circle of Sensibility” from Urban T. Holmes (Holmes 2002, 4) & “Types of Christian Spirituality from Ken Boa (Boa 2001, 469).

Chinese evangelical churches of my experiences in Markham and Richmond Hill have adopted a relatively conservative approach to the expression of societal regeneration spirituality, emphasizing outreach and evangelical events and overseas missions. Outreach programs focus on serving the local community as participating in the Great Commission. In the G.T.A. and surrounding areas, nightly Chinese news include a community segment, which advertises community events and services such as line dancing, ESL classes, filing income taxes for low-income families, or serving the homeless. Evangelistic programs, including Evangelical Explosion (an evangelistic program that has been widely used as a

training curriculum in the local church) and the Alpha Course (www.alphacanada.org, an evangelical course that seeks to introduce seekers to the basics of Christian faith), have become very popular among Chinese evangelical churches in the past decade.

The selected Chinese evangelical churches in G.T.A could consider embracing a more holistic approach of type 4 spirituality promoting and participating more regularly in social justice causes and care for creation. Most of these churches have a relatively conservative approach to “mission” as sharing the gospel to save souls, expressed as organized activities and events for the purposes of preaching the gospel. In the book, *The Mission of God*, Christopher Wright explains the meaning of mission and how it is a “much abused phrase” when it is limited to a list of things:

The Bible renders to us the story of God’s mission through God’s people in their engagement with God’s world for the sake of the whole of God’s creation. The Bible is the drama of this God of purpose engaged in the mission of achieving that purpose universally, embracing past, present and future, Israel and the nations, “life, the universe and everything,” and with its center, focus, climax, and completion in Jesus Christ. Mission is not just one of a list of things that the Bible happens to talk about, only a bit more urgently than some. Mission is, in that much-abused phrase, “What it’s all about.” (Wright 2006, 22)

Wright further expounds his dissatisfaction with the “popular use of the word mission (or more commonly in the United States, missions) solely in relation to human endeavors of various kinds” (Wright 2006, 6). He provides a comprehensive definition that challenges the traditional understanding of the word *mission* in the Chinese evangelical churches:

Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation. That is how I usually answer when I am asked how I would define mission. Our mission flows from and participates in the mission of God. (Wright 2006, 22-23)

In light of this, mission is not to be understood as just a list of evangelistic and gospel-related events and activities, but rather as a way of life where Christians are invited to commit to and participate in God's redemptive power, already at work, in His entire creation: the earth, humanity, culture, the nations and the future (Wright 2006, 28).

The Chinese Co-ordination Centre of World Evangelism (CCCOWE), an international organization that aims to bring world missions to Chinese Christians and churches, published an academic Chinese essay, *Spiritual Traditions of Chinese Churches*, in their publication, CCCOWE'96 Compendium. The authors (represented by the committee members Wan, Kao, Hui and Choi), explained that although puritanism impacted the 19th century's western church, the rise of pietism and the revival movement gave rise to individualism and a dualistic separation between the secular and spiritual. The practice of puritanism gradually devolved into moralistic and legalistic living. Chinese churches founded in this period, limited its Christianity to internalized personal experiences while strongly separating the secular and the spiritual. This resulted in an indifference towards the transformation of society, cultural, and academic world (Wan, Kao, Hui and Choi 1996, 280). Thus, to embrace a holistic approach in Type 4 spirituality, it is significant to understand the concept of missions beyond simply organizing soul-

saving evangelistic events. There are other components of missional work that involve the redemptive work of creation, including engaging with culture, politics, social justice, and the poor. It is a way of life that reflects the kingdom of God and ultimately brings a renewal and transformation of our community, society, and nation.

The four different types of Christian spirituality mentioned above are practiced and pursued by different spiritual traditions. They directly (and indirectly) speak of where spiritual transformation takes place, the disciplines that might bring about such change, and the goals of mature Christian spirituality. The figures above provide a visual understanding of the present spiritual model adopted by the Cantonese-speaking evangelical church of the G.T.A., as observed and described by the interviewed pastors. It seems Chinese evangelical churches tend to orient themselves towards type 1 cognitive spirituality, and with a conservative expression of the type 4, societal regeneration spirituality.

The following section, part three, will explore how I use the other two types of spirituality—experiential spirituality (kataphatic-heart) and contemplative spirituality (apophatic-heart)—as complementary to the present spiritual model of the Chinese evangelical churches, in order for them to build and experience a more holistic spirituality. We will focus on Ignatian, classical and contemporary spiritual practices which can be practiced both personally and communally.

Part Three: Using Experiential and Contemplative Spirituality

Part three in this section explores what Christian spirituality is and attempts to use experiential spirituality (Type 3) by adopting spiritual practices from Ignatian spirituality and other classical spiritual practices to enrich the spiritual lives of believers in the interviewed Chinese evangelical churches of the G.T.A. In this part, we will also use use contemplative spirituality (Type 4) through classical spiritual practices. The spiritual exercises chosen attempt to focus on the affective aspect of believers. Individuals engaging in these exercises will focus on experiencing and contemplating God with their hearts and emotions.

What is Spirituality?

When seeking to understand the broad subject of spiritual formation for the following discussion, it is important to understand what spirituality means. While searching on the worldwide web for images of “spirituality,” images of meditation, yoga, nature, and New Age-related art come up. With the increasingly popular phrase, “Spiritual but not religious,” it seems people want to experience spirituality through various means, but without institutionalized religion. However, David Benner, in his book, *Soulful Spirituality*, explains, “Religion and spirituality are intrinsically connected. Although they can be separated from each other, this always involves significant loss” (Benner 2011, 67).

Furthermore, according to Evan B. Howard, a professor of Christian spirituality, spirituality “is concerned with the entirety of the lived experience of

an individual or group in relationship with God” (Howard 2008, 21). In this definition, it expresses the significance of encountering God in lived experience. In referring to spiritual formation, he defines, “Spiritual formation is a rather general term referring to all attempts, means, instruction, and disciplines intended towards deepening of faith and furtherance of spiritual growth” (Howard 2008, 23). Mulholland, in his book, *Invitation to a Journey*, also defines spiritual formation as “a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others” (Mulholland 1993, 12). In light of these understanding, I will define spiritual formation is a journey, through various means, to be shaped in Christ-likeness, for both the love of God and for the love of others.

Part Four: Applying Experiential Spirituality through Ignatian Spirituality in the Selected Chinese Evangelical Churches

Ignatian spirituality is grounded in the experience of a Basque aristocrat boy of Northern Spain, Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556). His spirituality is based on his personal experience of transformation upon encountering God. In her book, *Landmark: An Ignatian Journey*, Margaret Silf explains that Ignatian spirituality strongly emphasizes being “down to earth” in meeting God in the daily life (Silf 2004, 17). Our relationship with God is explained in a metaphor of the way a fish relates to the ocean. Silf explains, “God is what gives me life in the first place and what keeps me alive. God is what gives me meaning. God is my context for being and my reason for being, and it is actually all down to God, not me” (Silf 2004,

18). This model encourages us to ““find God in all things”” (Silf 2004, 18). Since “God is in this creation” and so near to us, we just need to be aware of his work and presence in everything around us (Fleming 2008, 3). The Ignatian model tells us that God is in the movement of everyday life, in the created world, in both the believer’s story and the world’s story, in one another’s lives, as well as in “beauty, truth, compassion and integrity” (Silf 2004, 27). Our desire and aim is to choose “what better leads to God’s deepening life in [us]” (Fleming 2008, 3). Ignatian spirituality invites us to center our lives around his presence in everything we do, to be attentive about experiencing God in everything and to be transformed by our willing choice to please him.

The notable spiritual exercises of the Ignatian model include: the use of examen, gospel contemplation, discernment, and lastly, the cultivation of spiritual friendship through listening, accompanying and embodying.

The Presence of God in the Daily Narrative: The Examen

The Review of the Day, or the examen, is used to help us look back on the past twenty-four hours and review “what has been going on in and around you” (Silf 2004, 21). The prayer of examen invites an individual to be mindful, from the beginning of a day to its end, of “where God has felt real and alive to you” (21). It is about one taking the time to take notice of memorable events and feelings stirred from the encounters of the day. One aims to be keenly aware of what God is doing and how God has been revealing himself through the

relationship between God and the individual and the revelations of God in the universe and in nature. As David Fleming describes, Ignatius' "talent for simply 'noticing' or 'taking note' became the cornerstone of his approach to the spiritual life" (Fleming 2008, 8). The "noticing" through the prayer of examen helps us to find God in certain events and invites us to connect with our emotions by going deeply into our hearts through the exercises of silent listening and of careful examination of the day. The exercise reinforces God's presence in our daily encounters beyond the ordinary rationalistic mode; therefore, the exercise of examen would be a good complement to the present spiritual formation of the Chinese evangelical church. It would help cultivate the affective aspect of spirituality through daily attentiveness to the created world, daily events and encounters, and the presence of God in the midst of it all, including the reading of Scripture. The examen involves the following steps:

1. Ask God for light and awareness of his presence.
2. Give thanks, down to the very small things in your life.
3. Review your day and be discerning of God's voice throughout the activities and encountering of the day.
4. Petition for your shortcomings.
5. Look forward to the next day by seeking his direction and strength.

The Ignatian examen is a spiritual exercise that draws us into the awareness God's presence. It nurtures kataphatic/ heart spirituality by inviting us to recognize, recall, rest in and treasure the moments of encountering him in our daily movements. It helps evangelical Christians to process our God-story in

regular and daily life and enables us to recall his loving presence. It is a spiritual exercise that could guide Chinese evangelical Christians toward a more holistic spiritual journey since it encourages engaging with God affectively and not merely intellectually.

Gospel Contemplation

People's minds are storehouses of facts and data, but also of experiences, images, details, conversations, etc., proportionately deepened and vivified by the intensification of accompanying emotions. Our attempts at retrieving objective information are influenced by our subjective interpretations; they are not easily disentangled from one another. Ignatius Loyola must have understood this well, for his spirituality encourages us to encounter Christ through engaging with biblical truths with our imagination in order to deepen our intimacy with Jesus.

Ignatius first encountered the significance of employing the imagination while recuperating from battle injuries. His approach of using imagination and the use of imaginative prayer are outlined in his *Spiritual Exercises*, a compilation of meditations, prayers and contemplative exercises for long retreats (about thirty days) of silence and solitude. One of his approaches of imagining, also commonly known as gospel contemplation, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, is to “place ourselves fully within a story from the Gospel” (Fleming 2008, 57). During this process, we are invited to pretend to be onlooker-participants, engaging all the faculties of our senses. He encourages us to engage in kataphatic prayer, which uses “words,

images, symbols, and ideas” (Manney 2009); rather than using the apophatic form of prayer which empties the mind of any words and thoughts.

In gospel contemplation, Ignatius invites retreatants to engage their imaginations in reflecting on a gospel passage by awakening all their senses. One would reflect on what he would see, hear, taste, sense, and smell from within the gospel story, rather than analyze it objectively from without. For example, in the second week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius suggests that we imagine “the labors of the journey to Bethlehem, the struggles of the finding a shelter, the poverty, the thirst, the hunger, the cold, the insults that meet the arrival of God-with-us.” Through this form of imaginative contemplation, we are invited to experience Christ’s journey and to possibly know him more personally and to develop a more intimate relationship with him. As Fleming describes, “he [Ignatius] wants us to see Jesus interacting with others, Jesus making decisions, Jesus moving about, Jesus ministering. He doesn’t want us to *think about* Jesus. He wants us to *experience* him. He wants Jesus to fill our senses. He wants us to meet him” (Fleming 2008, 58).

The Ignatian approach of gospel contemplation is a great alternative for the typical devotional approach of the Chinese evangelical Christians. Chinese evangelical believers of my experience in Markham and Richmond Hill tend to default to the inductive Bible study method in understanding the Bible. It is a very good approach to understanding Scripture through the three steps of observation, interpretation and application; yet, it is weak in engaging one with God

experientially. Thus, “gospel contemplation” could be a good alternative to the inductive method because it engages our imaginations and all our senses in this exercise, thereby countering the overly intellectual tendency observed. This approach could help Christians nurture a different type of encounter with Jesus—one not grounded on information and knowledge about him, but rather on the reflected possibilities of what it would be like to see, hear and touch him personally.

Ignatian Discernment: Consolation & Desolation

Discernment plays a key role in the exercise of the Ignatian spirituality. The model was drawn from Ignatius’s own spiritual journey at Loyola where he discovered some helpful ways for identifying movements as either life-giving or life-draining. From an Ignatian perspective, discernment is a significant tool in helping us answer the question of the “what” we encounter daily. Monty Williams, in his book, *Gifts of Spiritual Intimacy: Following the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, tells us discernment is different from decision-making despite the result ending up the same. He says, “A decision is not necessarily a deliberate, self-conscious choice and it does not necessarily occur in the context of prayer. With discernment, we enter into a dialogue with God after establishing a right relationship. In that mutual sharing and trust, an answer emerges. Then we not only see as God sees, but we act as we believe God would want us to act” (Williams 2009, 161). For St. Ignatius, discerning correctly also signified our

moving forward “towards God, community and each other, as well as integrating the different aspects of ourselves” (William 2009, 161). It is a spirit of harmony and fruitfulness in each aspect of our lives.

Margaret Silf illustrates Ignatius’ orientation towards the discerning of the moods with the terms, *consolation* and *desolation*, a state of moving towards God or away from God. When we are in *consolation*, our lives are moving towards God. Ignatius describes the soul to be inflamed with God, resulting in a greater sense of hope and charity. There is a sense of life and we somehow sense that we are on solid ground. When we are in *desolation*, we tend to drift away from God. Those who are in a state of *desolation* find “The action of God in their lives disturbs them and churns up their mood, creating peacelessness, while the things that come from their own kingdom make them feel good and leave them apparently contented” (Silf 2012, 74). It is a state of pleasing one's own desires rather than seeking the fulfillment of God's. It is comparable to standing in sinking sand, constantly moving only to become more deeply mired in anxiety and insecurity. The words Ignatius uses to describe desolation include, “Darkness of soul, disturbance, movement to things low and earthy, disquiet of different agitations and temptation” (Fleming 2008, 92). This image parallels the parable of the wise and foolish builders in Matthew 7:24-27 where the house with the foundation built on solid ground by the wise builder was able to resist the impact of the rising stream, falling rain and blowing winds. The foolish builder suffered desolation because his foundation of sand collapsed, unable to withstand the

fierce weather. Ignatius gives lengthy and in-depth guidelines for discerning between the two in his “Rule for the Discernment of Spirits” at the end of his *Spiritual Exercises*.

The Ignatian model of discernment would be a good resource for even mature Christian disciples who are already well-developed in cognitive spirituality. It would help typical Chinese evangelical Christians process head knowledge by connecting it with the affective aspect that, as a culture and denomination, may lack. Ignatius’ model is a great spiritual resource because it provides a framework, with steps and guidelines, for those lacking an example.

In sum, the Ignatian model of spirituality of the examen, gospel contemplation, and the model of discernment are spiritual exercises that nurture kataphatic/heart spirituality, and would therefore, complement the current spiritual practices of Chinese evangelical Christians in the G.T.A. The examen enables us to deepen our experience of God by noticing God’s movement in the daily rhythms of life—a spiritual practice that cultivates one’s relationship with God. Gospel contemplation stimulates an imaginative experience of the gospel, immersing us in the story and pulling us onto the stage rather than allowing for us to remain outside of the story and in the audience, inviting us to the possibility of a personal encounter of God. The discernment model invites us to take note of our moods, whether of *consolation* or *desolation*, which we then seek to align to a deeper harmony with God. These approaches to practicing prayer and reading Scripture complement the pursuit of biblical truth, and in particular, for

evangelical Chinese churches whose experience has been mainly cognitive. The kataphatic/heart spiritual practices of the daily Examen, gospel contemplation, and the model for discernment would complement and support the store of knowledge already possessed by Chinese evangelical Christians. Though some resistance is anticipated, due to the unfamiliarity of these spiritual traditions, deepening spiritual intimacy with God is also anticipated for type 1 Christians should they open themselves to trying these new practices.

Applying Experiential Spirituality through Classical Spiritual Practices

This section explores what spiritual discipline is and its significance throughout the church history and its purpose for today. We will look at the classical practice of the fixed-hour prayer, *lectio divina* and spiritual direction; and the benefits of these practices. Similar to Ignatian Spirituality, these practices focus on engaging the heart with a relational and experiential approach.

What is Spiritual Discipline?

Discipline may not be a popular word in our postmodern world, which tends to value free-spirited spontaneity more. Discipline may be considered too rigid, too intentional, too contrived for a culture that equates ease and intuitive resonance for what is natural. As a result, discipline may be perceived as unnatural, and therefore, fake, even suspicious. As for Christians, spiritual discipline or spiritual practices should be considered as a helpful vehicle that

takes us to where we want to go: closer to God. Dallas Willard, in the essay, *Spiritual Disciplines, Spiritual Formation and the Restoration of the Soul*,

explains:

A discipline is an activity within our power--something we can do--which brings us to a point where we can do what we at present cannot do by direct effort. Discipline is in fact a natural part of the structure of the human soul, and almost nothing of any significance in education, culture or other attainments is achieved without it. Everything from learning a language to weight lifting depends upon it, and its availability in the human makeup is what makes the individual human being responsible for the kind of person they become. (Willard 1998, 106)

Spiritual discipline plays an even more important role in the spiritual life.

The goal of disciplines in the Christian life is to follow Christ and to be conformed in his likeness in the path of discipleship. Dallas Willard continues to illustrate,

It is the renewal of the whole person from the inside, involving differences in thought, feeling and character that may never be manifest in outward behavior at all. This is what Paul has in mind when he speaks of putting off the 'old man' and putting on the new, 'renewed to resemble in knowledge the one who created us...' (Col. 3:10). (Willard 1998, 107)

Spiritual disciplines or spiritual practices are intentional efforts for the purposes of delivering us to our spiritual desires for transformation.

Spiritual Disciplines throughout the Church History

Spiritual disciplines are pathways that lead us closer to God and they have been practiced throughout the history of the Church. Adele Ahlberg Calhoun observes that the Early Church linked the desire for a deeper relationship with God to "intentional practices, relationships and experiences that gave people

space in their lives to ‘keep company’ with Jesus” (Calhoun 2005, 17).

Disciplines can be found in Acts 2:42—the earliest formation of the Church.

Believers practiced the discipline of listening to the teaching of the apostles, of prayer, of life together, as well as the discipline of “experience” when they broke the bread of the Lord. Calhoun observes there are more disciplines to be followed in the books of Acts (Calhoun 2005, 17), such as the discipline of compassion (Acts 3), the discipline of evangelism (Acts 4), the discipline of service (Acts 7), the discipline of fixed-hour prayer (Acts 3:1; 10:9), the discipline of fasting (Acts 14:23), and the discipline of discernment (Acts 15). Spiritual practices continued to be practiced throughout the Early Church era. The *Didache*, (Lumkin 2012) an early Christian treatise, provided instruction to Christians in various disciplines, including stewardship, fasting, prayer, humility and the Lord’s Supper.

When the Church was relieved from the persecution of the fourth and fifth centuries, a group of Christians—later known as the "desert fathers"—perceived the growing harmony between the spiritual and the political as a compromise and threat to their love of God. They moved into the desert for the purposes of deepening their spiritual longings for Christ, striving for a spiritual atmosphere like that of the Early Church. This gave rise to the classical spiritual disciplines of solitude, silence, contemplation and spiritual direction. Other communities who shared this desire were also established. The spiritual rhythms of fixed-hour prayer, Bible memorization, devotional reading, meditation, service, and hospitality were created to ultimately help them create space for God. These

spiritual practices characterized the daily rhythms of monastic communities (Calhoun 2005, 18).

Various forms of spiritual discipline continued to evolve according to the needs of each generation. With the invention of printing technology in the sixteenth century, the Bible was made accessible in vernacular languages other than Latin. One of the five solas of The Reformation of 1517 emphasized *sola scriptura, scriptura sola*—only Scripture and Scripture only—and the principle of the priesthood of all believers (Johnston 2012). In her book, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, Phyllis Tickle argues that the Reformation directly contributed towards the “literacy that accelerated the drive toward rationalism and from there to the Enlightenment and from there straight into the science and technology and literature and governments that characterizes our lives today” (Tickle 2012, 28). When biblical interpretation no longer exclusively belonged to the educated religious elite, Bible study, local witness, world mission, stewardship, and intercessory prayer became common spiritual practices. The characteristic frenzy of the postmodern technological world has made a way for classical spiritual disciplines again. Calhoun states, “Classical disciplines like solitude, silence, rest, spiritual direction and retreat are resurging as people desperately seek a quiet, still center in the midst of the whirlwind” (Calhoun 2005, 18). These practices are also the promises of strength and renewal from God (Isa. 30:5, Isa. 40:31, Psalm 46:10). Throughout the centuries, various forms of spiritual disciplines, with the strengthening power of

the Holy Spirit, have given us ways to build intimacy with Jesus and to be transformed in His likeness.

Why Practice Spiritual Disciplines?

Bill Hull mentions three reasons for the practices of spiritual disciplines in his book, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ*. First, spiritual disciplines “develop habits of the heart” (Hull 2006, 194). He explains that practicing spiritual disciplines does not “accentuate our strengths; it addresses our weaknesses” (Hull 2006, 194). The essence of disciplines is to seek and depend upon the work of the Holy Spirit who brings transformation to the submitted will, evidenced by the practice of disciplines in faith. Second, spiritual disciplines are just tools. Hull reminds us that there is no virtue in the disciplines themselves. Bible study, prayer or fasting are simply tools to help us to cultivate our intimacy with God and to love our neighbours. Third, Hull reminds us that spiritual disciplines only provide indirect assistance (Hull 2006). Spiritual exercises set us up into positions that “strengthen and transform our character” (Hull 2006, 196). Transformation of the person, then, is made possible when our wills cooperate with the agent of change—the Holy Spirit—through the means of spiritual disciplines done in faith.

Part three in this session presents how I use experiential spirituality through classical spiritual practices of fixed-hours prayer, *lectio divina* and discusses the dyadic approach of spiritual formation through spiritual direction.

These practices nurture the heart through praying with the Church, meditating the Scripture and noticing God’s activities in our life.

Classical Spiritual Practices: Fixed-Hour Prayer

In my experience, most evangelical churches, including the Baptist and the Christian and Missionary Alliance denominations, do not typically teach nor practice fixed-hour prayers. Most prayers are said in private or in corporate prayer meetings and services, and mostly use spontaneous prayer. Most evangelical Christians would not be familiar with the terms “Divine Office” or “Divine Hour”—terms well-known to Orthodox Christians who practice this spiritual exercise, and to Roman Catholics who know this type of prayer as “Liturgy of the Hours”. The Benedictines (both Roman Catholic and Protestant) know it as the “Daily Office” (Boers 2003, 7). Scot McKnight’s book, *Praying with the Church: Following Jesus Daily, Hourly, Today*, illustrates how fixed-hour prayers were used by people in the Old Testament and even Jesus. For example, Daniel in the Old Testament prayed three times daily: “morning, noon and evening” (McKnight 2006, 33); and the psalmists practiced “fixed hours of prayer” (McKnight 2006, 34); and Jesus rose early in the morning to pray. While most of us practice what McKnight calls “praying in the church”—which is to pray privately and spontaneously—he maintains it would benefit Christians to also practice “praying with the Church,” which is to pray corporately with other Christians of the global community, united by the use of a prayer book. There are three potential benefits.

First, it could provide words for those who otherwise lack them, cultivating deeper appreciation of God's words in the Psalms and providing refreshing language as a means of enriching our prayer life and affection toward God. Second, it could help cultivate a habit of abiding in Him through intentional, fixed prayer times. Third, it could create a sense of unity with other believers, as we are consciously and constantly connecting with, and uniting with, the Church. On the other hand, it also has the disadvantage of being mechanical or impersonal.

Fixed-hour prayer is a form of prayer that could help us to abide in God's presence through a rhythm intentionally built into our daily lives. The fixed-hour prayer could be traced from the beginning of our faith. In her book, *The Divine Hours*, Phyllis Tickle explains,

Fixed-hour prayer is one of the seven spiritual disciplines that came directly into Christianity from Judaism. Like tithing, observance of the Sabbath, fasting, or following the liturgical year. It informed the spiritual life of Our Lord and of the twelve Apostles, just as it informs and shapes the faith and practices of millions of Christians today. (Tickle 2007, vii)

In the same manner, the rich legacy of fixed-hour prayer could greatly nourish the prayer lives of evangelical Chinese Christians with its rich biblical, historical and spiritual benefits. McKnight rightly addresses the problem that most people struggle to pray and there is no exception in Chinese evangelical believers. Arthur Boers, a Mennonite pastor and assistant professor of pastoral theology, confesses, "Common morning and evening prayer help me overcome many difficulties and the weakness of my own prayer discipline. These regular prayers keep reminding me that God is present, at work, and reliable. Thus, such prayer

calls me to pay attention and to trust that God is active, even when I cannot discern God's activity for a long, long time" (Boers 2003, xix). This is especially relevant for a generation becoming increasingly busy and distracted from praying. It not only takes time which we seem to have less and less of—which is counterintuitive—but also intentional effort—which is countercultural. There is no exception—not even for pastors. Looking forward to scheduled appointments with God through learning habits of re-orienting ourselves around him can help keep us centered on him, his love and his promises, no matter how chaotic our days can be. There are many practices helpful to finding God in the midst of busyness: praying the mid-day prayer, singing and praying the Psalms, listening to the hymn of the day, and taking short moments of sacred silence.

Fixed-hour prayer, also teaches us the power of praying the Psalms and its relationship to the prayer life of a Christian. McKnight points out the role of the Psalms in being “the first teacher and the mentor in prayer for all of Judaism” (McKnight 2006, 54), and it continues to be the teacher of prayer, even for twenty-first century Christians. The Psalms give voice to the soul, expressing our deepest cries to God, day and night. Boers notes, “The psalmist often speaks of praying, worshipping, sacrificing, singing, or complaining to God in the morning” (Boers 2003, 33). For instance, Psalm 29:16 says “I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning”; and Psalm 5:3 says, “In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning, I lay my request before you and wait expectantly”. In addition, the psalmist expresses the emotional struggles that belong to the

night: “Weeping lingers for the night, but joy comes with the morning” (Psalm 30:3). The rich emotional prayers of the psalmists are an excellent source of spiritual practice for evangelical Christian Christians to pray in the regular rhythm of fixed-hours and also to engage one’s affection in prayer.

Although the fixed-hour prayer has not been a traditional part of the Chinese evangelical church, and although believers could possibly discount the discipline, due to discomfort or unfamiliarity, mature Christians would be wise to learn this practice borrowed from other traditions. Much is to be benefited from this abundant feast of Scripture-based liturgy (through psalmody), hymns, prayer, silence, and Scripture reading. The prayer book, *Take Our Moment and Our Days: An Anabaptist Prayer Book*, (Boers 2007) is also good alternative for evangelical Christians because it uses section titles, such as “call to discipleship,” “call to intercession” that are familiar to evangelical believers.

In summary, individuals with the habit of spontaneous prayer will require a personal, and rather deliberate, decision to learn how to pray with the Church by following a prayer book. The two are very different spiritual exercises. Nevertheless, replacing the typical intellectual reading of the Bible with the rhythm of intentional abiding in God’s presence, at least twice a day, could be a great way to diversify and enlarge Chinese evangelical Christian spirituality.

Classical Spiritual Practices: Lectio Divina

Lectio divina is a Latin phrase that means “holy reading” or “divine reading” of Scripture. According to Howard, this approach of practicing *lectio divina* could be traced back to the Rule of Benedict, “[When] monks of the sixth century were instructed to have specified times of manual labour and divine reading (*lectio divina*)” (Howard 2012, 58). This monastic practice of *lectio divina* was then formalized as a four-step process by the Carthusian monk, Guigo II, during the twelfth century. Modern evangelical pastors in the past decades rarely use it, perhaps due to the fact that *lectio divina* tends to be viewed as a Catholic approach to reading the Bible. In Howard’s essay, however, he argues that *lectio divina* is indeed found in the evangelical tradition:

Many of the particular components of *lectio divina* are not only kindred, but common in the evangelical tradition. Indeed, a tracing of evangelical use of Scripture from its Reformation roots through the twentieth century (through Puritans, early Anglicans, Pietists, Revivalists, Holiness supporters, Fundamentalists, and so on) suggests a formative approach to the reading of Scripture, bearing great similarity to what we call *lectio divina* today, was a common, if not normal practice. (Howard 2012, 57)

In the twenty-first century, the practice of *lectio divina* has become increasingly popular in the evangelical churches as we have seen an increasing number of books and websites written about and developed on this subject. Some more conservative churches raise concerns, seeing *lectio divina* as “a doorway into Roman Catholicism or New Age heresy” (Howard 2012, 56). However, we learn that, historically speaking, *lectio divina* is actually similar to the evangelical Church’s traditional components of reading the Bible (reading, meditating,

praying and abiding) although it may not use the same terminology. This could be illustrated in Yuille's article titled, *Conversing with God's Word: Scripture Meditation in the Piety of George Weinnock*, where he explains, "When Weinnock speaks of Scripture meditation... the goal is the internalization of God's Word. It is a *dwelling* or *reflecting* upon Scripture, a *musings* or *mulling* over the biblical text, whereby the truth of God's Word grips the three main faculties of the soul: the understanding, the affections, and the will" (Yuille 2012, 37). It is reading Scripture while being meditatively and prayerfully saturated in the loving presence of God.

What is *Lectio Divina* and What are its Benefits?

The purpose of *lectio divina* differs from that of the rational approach of the inductive Bible study, which places more emphasis on the exegesis and hermeneutics of the text. *Lectio divina* is contemplative in nature and uses the approach of listening. It tends to the living words of God, as described in the Book of Hebrews as "alive and active" (Hebrews 4:12a). The daily listening to the word of God aims to cultivate an intimate and loving relationship with Christ. It emphasizes engaging the heart while listening to and meditating on the revealed truth of God. As Wilhoit and Howard describe in their book, *Discovering Lectio Divina: Bringing Scripture into Ordinary Life*, "*Lectio divina* can help us grow in love by experiencing God's healing love as we meditate on his word and by learning to pay attention to the roots of love—our thoughts" (Wilhoit and Howard

2012, 8). It is comprised of four steps: *Lectio* (Reading), *Meditatio* (Meditating/Reflecting), *Oratio* (Praying), and *Contemplatio* (Resting). A guided exercise in be found in Appendix E.

The practice of *lectio divina* is a meditative and contemplative approach to praying the Scriptures, purposing to draw us into a growing relationship of love with Christ. In particular, when we enter into prayer, *oratio*, we cultivate our intimacy with God by engaging our heart, mind, spirit and body. Mulholland states:

This activity nurtures the feeling side of our temperament. We share with God the feelings the text has aroused in us, feelings such as love, joy, sorrow, anger, repentance, desire, need, conviction, consecration. We pour out our heart to God in complete openness and honest, especially as the text has probed aspects of our being and doing in the midst of various issues and relationships. (Mulholland 1993, 114)

Lectio divina complements the over-emphasis of the mind happening in the selected Chinese evangelical churches. Not only does it encourage a more holistic interaction between heart and mind, it also brings the kataphatic and apophatic types of prayer together, allowing for interplay between the revealed and the mystical aspects of God, allowing for a deeper, fuller and more intimate experience of God.

Spiritual Practices through a Dyadic Relationship: Spiritual Direction

Spiritual direction is a spiritual discipline where a person seeks the companionship of a spiritual director that helps him/her to better discern God's activity and movement, in the journey of growing intimacy with God and

obedience to him. Sarah Patterson explains, “Spiritual directors hear stories, note patterns, serve as a reminding force in directees’ lives but, contrary to the title, should never forcefully direct anyone to take a specific course of action”

(Patterson 2014, 10). Jeannette Bakke, in her book, *Holy Invitations*, explains:

Spiritual direction is a way to pursue God with all our heart and a way to respond to God, who is pursuing us. In direction we gather many threads together. We bring diverse prayers, impressions, and experiences into direction conversations to invite the Spirit of God to reveal themes and patterns, movements and counter-movements that affect our spirit and life. (Bakke 2000, 22)

This soul-searching relationship and conversation is characterized by a spirit of openness. Eugene Peterson describes his personal journey of spiritual direction in

Imago Dei’s newsletter, *On Spiritual Direction by Eugene Peterson*:

Spiritual direction is not a subject that you learn about, it is an organic life that you enter into. In meeting with my spiritual director I am drawn into a living, oral tradition. I am in touch with a pool of historical and experienced wisdom and insight into the life of faith and the practice of prayer in a way that is very different than when I am alone in my study...In spiritual direction I am guided to attend to my uniqueness in the larger context of spirituality, and to discern more precisely where my faith development fits into it...Our primary task is to be a pilgrim. Only a life committed to spiritual adventure, personal integrity, honest and alert searching prayer is adequate for the task of spiritual direction. Our best preparation for the work of spiritual direction is an honest life. (Peterson 2006)

Eugene Peterson captures the very spirit and core value of the meaning and essence of spiritual direction. Its primary orientation is to lead us towards God in his grace. It is a sacred journey through which we become more mindful and aware of our faithful God’s ever-present activity and presence in our lives.

In an age becoming increasingly challenging for sustaining spiritual life, evangelical Christian leaders are in need of forging spiritual pathways to nurture spiritual life. Dirks observes, “Leighton Ford, long-time associate of Billy Graham, is one such evangelical who has felt a deep need for the recovery of spiritual direction and now gives most of his time to nurturing a few leaders” (Dirks 2013, 35). Hopefully, the practice of connecting with a spiritual companion, through the discipline of spiritual direction, is on its way of being rediscovered as one pathway to deepening our relationship with God and to being increasingly formed in his likeness.

Benefits and Concerns of Spiritual Direction for the Chinese Evangelical Church

Spiritual direction nurtures the cultivation of kataphatic-heart spirituality through reflecting upon and dialoguing over the work of God in one’s life. The one-on-one approach of spiritual direction is uncommon to Chinese evangelical believers, but it could be an answer to the problems caused by the face-saving culture of Chinese Christians: the lack of vulnerability and genuine fellowship. Chinese evangelicals, however, may be suspicious or skeptical of the practice due to its affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church. Furthermore, it may not initially appeal to those already inclined toward the insularity of cognitive spirituality. Nevertheless, Chinese evangelicals are growing more familiar with and more comfortable with spiritual direction due to the rising validation, advocacy, and endorsement of spiritual direction by their own pastors, as well as

many reputable evangelical leaders, such as Larry Crabb, (founder of New Way Ministry); Eugene Peterson (author of *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*); Ruth Haley Barton (founder and spiritual director of *Transforming Center*); and Steve Macchia (founder of *Leadership Transformation* and instructor of spiritual formation direction at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary). Moreover, an increasing number of evangelical pastors are being trained as spiritual directors. Hopefully, this will help enhance the rediscovery and openness for the practice of spiritual direction in Chinese evangelical churches, thus improving the possibility of cultivating holistic spirituality in this postmodern world.

Applying Contemplative Spirituality (Apophatic-Heart) through Classical Spiritual Practices

Contemplative spirituality nurtures the apophatic-heart and addresses the significance of abstinence and emptying. The purpose is to renew the inner life journey. The Bible reminds us to “abstain from fleshly desires, which war against the soul” (1Peter 2:11 KJV), so that our lives will bring glory to God in the outward expression of our lives. Peter uses the term “asceticism”—the Greek word for training or exercise discussed in the earlier chapter—a discipline that takes the body seriously in order that it would be properly directed towards a “sober and moderate use of all God’s gifts” (Willard 1990, 159). In the postmodern technological world, we are constantly bombarded and distracted by

the (seeming) omni-presence and accessibility of social media. We are constantly stimulated, beckoned, informed, alerted, updated, etc. We are ever enticed to buy more, try more, read more, engage more, want more, learn more, explore more, etc. The discipline of abstinence, then, becomes more vital and crucial than ever before, as all sorts of distractions have come to occupy and settle in our lives. Calhoun illustrates, “The discipline of abstinence detaches us from hurry, clutter and busyness, and opens us to being with God alone. They remind us that we are human beings, not human doings, and that God is more concerned with who we become than what we accomplish. They address sins of omission” (Calhoun 2005, 19-20). When we learn to deny indulging ourselves from excessiveness, we find ourselves increasing in strength, inner harmony and peace, as an athlete enhances his/her strength and endurance. The following section attempts to use the practice of classical disciplines of solitude, silence, Sabbath and contemplative retreat as means of facilitating the inner life, for the cultivation of contemplative spirituality in the selected Chinese evangelical churches.

Silence and Solitude

Silence and solitude are chosen as two of the key components in nurturing contemplative spirituality. In the gospels, we are shown how solitude played a significant role in the ministry of our Lord. He deliberately set time apart to intentionally spend time with his Father. Solitude is the purposeful abstaining from interacting with other people, withdrawing ourselves from companionship.

Willard explains how solitude is an intentional action: We close ourselves away; we go to the ocean, to the desert, the wilderness, or to the anonymity of the urban crowd. It is more than just drawing rest or refreshment from nature, though that too can contribute to our spiritual well-being. Rather, solitude is choosing to be alone and to dwell on our experience of isolation from other human beings (Willard 1990, 160). It is a purposeful practice to remove any attachments and dependencies, so that we may experience the freedom that comes from depending upon God alone. In day-to-day interactions, Willard inserts, we are locked into “patterns of feeling, thought, and action that are geared to a world set against God. Nothing but solitude can allow the development of a freedom from the ingrained behaviours that hinder our integration into God’s order” (Willard 1990, 160). When our usual stimuli from habituated interactions are removed, we allow the journey of solitude to guide us to once again see life with perspective and clarity, and allow us to reflect on how created things can, and do, deceive, trap and oppress us. Thomas Merton reflects this spirit of solitude in his biography when he writes, “That is the only reason why I desire solitude—to be lost to all created things, to die to them and to the knowledge of them, for they remind me of my distance from you: that you are far from them, even though you are in them (Merton 1978, 421). Solitude provides a space to reflect and filter the debris of the soul and to re-anchor our attention to God.

Like other spiritual practices, solitude has its own discomforts and pains as we come to confront our naked and fragmented soul. It is well-illustrated in Ruth

Barton's book, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence*. She transparently reveals her own struggles in the beginning journey of her retreat:

...In solitude I make the frustrating discovery that often my mind keeps me flailing around rather than settling into rest in God. I begin to notice all the ways my mind distracts me from the very thing my soul is longing for, for the experience of rest, union and communion with God. Oh, how our minds need to learn how to rest in the way the psalmist describes. (Barton 2010, 71)

Solitude can be painful as we come to encounter the broken, fragmented and disoriented self from which we can no longer hide, in the shell of our superficial securities and amid the crowd. We can only survive solitude if we allow ourselves to be opened up before God and cling to him. It is through this sort of encountering that we come to place our trust in such a God and, thus, experience his renewing grace and power. As described in Isaiah: "But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength; they will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint (Isaiah 40:31). As described by Friar Martin Laird, the true nature of practicing the discipline of solitude is to:

Integrate the awareness of God's presence into all aspects of life—both in the quiet of one's room or in the bustle of the marketplace. The interior solitude that facilitates our communion with God and which is served by exterior solitude, then cultivates and bears hidden witness to our solidarity with all humanity. It is a way of being with God and, therefore, with all people. (Fr. Martin Laird 2012)

Solitude is a way of living through which a soul prepares space to receive the presence of God and thus prepare ourselves to reach out to people more fully.

Silence is the necessary partner to solitude. It goes beyond mere solitude. It gives to God the stillness into which he can whisper and minister his word. However, silence is becoming increasingly strange in our culture. A plethora of compact devices provide constant access to movies, videos, music, and people at any time and people all over the world are becoming increasingly accustomed to its constant and encroaching buzzing and presence. Curiously, noise is comforting because it allows one to evade acknowledging the disturbance within. Ruth Barton, in her book, *Sacred Rhythms*, writes:

Silence deepens our experience of solitude, because in silence we choose to unplug not only from the constant stimulation of life in the company of others but also from our own addiction to noise, words and activity. It creates a space for listening to the knowings that go beyond words, and feeling no pressure at all to put the depths of the human soul into words. We enter into solitude and silence on the basis of our desire for God, and it becomes a place for being with our desire in God's presence. (Barton 2006, 32)

In quietness, we begin to take notice of things that we did not know were there, or were avoiding. Any feelings of sadness, loneliness, anger, disappointment or pain begin to surface. An illustration comes to mind. I recently taught a class on silence and solitude, and discovered that many found even ten minutes of silence strange and uncomfortable. A student came afterward to share her bewilderment over her sensing deep pain during that short exercise. She shared how she avoided silence by turning on the television constantly and how she even disliked her showers because there was no noise; she always had something playing, even until she went to bed—every day. She illustrates the

temptation of keeping distracted, especially if it keeps us from facing the struggles and pains that are within.

Embracing the discipline of silence is not an easy journey. While we constantly acknowledge the fact of how busy our lives are, Benner describes the phenomenon that “our busyness—which we often blame for our lack of inner stillness—is not the cause of a problem but a way of avoiding it. While we may be attracted to solitude and silence, we also fear them because with each comes an inevitable confrontation with everything we are trying to avoid. External silence confronts us with the realities of our inner world” (Benner 2011, 147). This conflict of desire and avoidance is vividly illustrated in Ruth Barton’s personal reflection of her struggle:

I’ve looked forward to this so much...but funny thing now is I’m scared and uptight about so many things. The biggest fear is about the silence, not knowing if I’ll be able to settle down, not knowing what I will have to face within myself. I’m afraid of being bored, frantic panicky, I am afraid of wanting to go home and not being able to ... I’m afraid of letting go.... (Barton 2010, 48)

All the struggles and pains that surface during solitude or silence can become invitations to prayer. Silence provides the environment for the soul to come out. It is a time to listen to the cries and to allow for the contents of the heart to spill out. Instead of criticizing and judging the voices, it is a time to release them into the presence of our loving and gracious God who welcomes and accepts the soul—the ultimate place where the soul longs and desires to be. It is the picture depicted in Psalm 27:4-5. “One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on

the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock” (Psalm 27:4-5). Another image is found in Psalm 84: Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage (Psalm 84: 3-5).

The practice of solitude and silence is desperately needed for the healing and strengthening of many Chinese evangelical church leaders. Simon Wong, General Director of the Association of Christian Evangelical Ministries (Canada), in his article *Assessment of Pastoral Mental Health*, for the ACEM Newsletter (June 2017 in Chinese), said that pastoral ministry is a high-risk career. He stated that the research report of North America shows that there are 1500 pastors leaving ministry due to burn-out, conflicts or moral issues each month. Without exception in some of the Chinese evangelical churches in my experiences, many Christian leaders suffer from exhaustion from being over-worked. They are not finding the necessary rest found in solitude and silence with God. Willard exhorts us wisely with the following words:

Indeed, solitude and silence are powerful means to grace. Bible study, prayer and church attendance, among the most commonly prescribed activities in Christian circles, generally have little effect for soul transformation, as is obvious to any observer. If all the people doing them were transformed to health and righteousness by it, the world would be vastly changed. Their failure to bring about the change is precisely because the body and soul are so exhausted, fragmented and conflicted that the prescribed activities cannot be appropriately engaged, and by the large degenerate into legalistic and ineffectual rituals. Lengthy solitude

and silence, including rest, can make them very powerful.” (Willard 1998, 107)

The discipline of solitude and silence—times of resting in God—are deeply neglected among leaders. Dallas Willard points this out in his article, “Personal Soul Care,” in the book *Pastor’s Guide to Effective Ministry*:

What a paradox! This is so easily a challenge for many ministers. Allowing service for Christ to steal our devotion to Him is a radical failure in personal soul care. But it is one from which the practice of communing with Christ in times of solitude and silence can deliver us. (Willard 2002)

It is hoped that the pastors of the Chinese evangelical churches in the G.T.A. would learn to “cease striving and know that [he is] God” (Psalm 46:10 NASB), ministering out of a deep and rich life of intimacy with Christ, resting in his presence and receiving power from God’s ministering to us in times of solitude and silence. It is hoped that pastors would be given enough freedom to take rest. It is hoped that Chinese evangelical churches would find and cherish this intimacy with God, putting faith into the faithfulness of God rather than into the dutifulness of man. A “rule of life”—a discipline of helping structure one’s life—would be immensely beneficial to the Chinese evangelical church, at all levels, helping regulate a schedule of solitude and silence otherwise absent from the busyness of ministry.

Sabbath

Sabbath is another significant means in nurturing contemplative spirituality. Of the Ten Commandments, the fourth commandment on keeping the Sabbath holy—by abstaining from work—may be the least emphasized and least

taught. Many people—believers and pastors—fail to interpret it correctly and understand it well. Christians generally do not feel guilty when they disobey this command. In his book, *The Great Omission*, Dallas Willard explains, “Sabbath is a way of life (cf. Heb. 4:3 & 9-11). It sets us free from bondage to our own efforts. Only in this way can we come to the power and joy of a radiant life in ministry, a blessing to all we touch. And yet Sabbath is almost totally absent from the existence of contemporary Christians and their ministers” (Willard 2014, 34). As a result, many Christians, including pastors, disobey God on this matter and have not been able to enjoy the blessings it offers.

What is Sabbath? Sabbath is God’s gift to us, just as our lives are, as well as are opportunities to minister. The Bible tells us, “Six day you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work” (Exodus 20: 9-10). Another extension of this same command is found in Leviticus 25:4-7: God’s people were to sow the fields, prune them and gather from them for six years, but for the seventh year, the covenant people of God were to lay the land to rest for an entire year. The Lord promised, “I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years” (Lev. 25:21). The notion of stopping work on the seventh day and year is an invitation to rest and to trust the Lord’s incredible promise and gift to reward us for resting with him! Willard inserts, “Very practically, Sabbath is simply ‘casting your cares upon Him,’ to find that in actual fact ‘He cares for you’ (1 Peter 5:7). It is using the keys to the Kingdom to receive the resources for

abundant living and ministering” (Willard 2014, 35). Deuteronomy’s reason for Sabbath-keeping is to remind the Israelites that they are a redeemed people, and freed from slavery of Egypt (Deuteronomy 5: 15). Eugene Peterson explains the two biblical reasons for Sabbath-keeping, arising from two different emphases made by the two different books, Exodus and Deuteronomy. He explains that the two together illustrate "parallel Sabbath activities of praying and playing. The Exodus reason directs us to the contemplation of God, which becomes prayer. The Deuteronomy reason directs us to social leisure, which becomes play. Praying and playing are deeply congruent with each other and have extensive inner connections” (Peterson 1989, 74). Marva Dawn, in her book, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, also carries the similar notion that Sabbath is about ceasing (work, productivity and accomplishment), resting (physical, emotional and intellectual), embracing (the values of the Christian community, giving instead of requiring, our call in life and the world), and feasting (with music, beauty, food and festival) (Dawn 1989).

Celebrating and observing the Sabbath could look very differently amongst Christians. The spirit of the law is not to bind us into legalistic command but to free us from labouring and for rest. It is to put our faith in God so that even though we do not work, we trust our God reigns; so, we can simply enjoy God and his creation. Eugene Peterson illustrates a delightful sample of the joy and spirit of observing Sabbath in his own context:

Monday is my Sabbath. Nothing is scheduled for Mondays. . . . My wife joins me in observing the day. We make a lunch, put it in a daypack, take

our binoculars, and drive anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour, to a trailhead along a river or into the mountains. Before we begin our hike my wife reads a psalm and prays. After that prayer there is no more talking- we enter into silence that will continue for the next two or three hours, until we stop for lunch.

We walk leisurely, emptying ourselves, opening ourselves to [God's beauty in nature]... We break the silence with prayer or blessing for the sandwiches and fruit, the river and the forest.. We return home in the middle or late afternoon, putter, do odd jobs, read. After supper I usually write family letters. That's it. No Sinai thunder. No Damascus Road illuminations. No Patmos visions. A day set apart for solitude and silence. Not-doing. Being-there. The sanctification of time. (Peterson 1989, 82)

The simple description offered by Peterson in living the Sabbath illustrates the sabbatical spirit of prayer, ceasing, resting, playing, feasting; a redemptive freedom and harmony in Christ. Chinese evangelical churches need to cultivate and embrace the spiritual practice and commandment of Sabbath. The virtue of working hard, at the expense of Sabbath then, is a curse and a source of enslavement. This could be done by refraining from programs and meetings on Sundays. By divesting the Chinese evangelical church of the belief and culture which supports the drive to make sacrifices *for* God at the expense of sacrificing Sabbath-honouring spirituality, the hope is that they will find space for actual rest. By scaling back from over-programming, the members and pastors of Chinese evangelical churches could cease playing god and stop burning out, and actually find time to rest in the presence of the one and true God.

Contemplative Retreat

Contemplative retreat is another practice of contemplative spirituality. The idea of attending a contemplative retreat is foreign for most Christians in my

evangelical circle. Many conferences or retreats, especially in the context of Chinese evangelical churches, are mainly talks from keynote speakers. Based on my previous fourteen years of pastoral ministry (with Chinese evangelical churches in the G.T.A.), each retreat had a minimum of four sermons. In addition to the sermons, there were seminars, small group Bible studies and fellowship time. In church, much time was spent on reminding parishioners of the need for evangelism and mission work. Furthermore, an endless list of events kept people stimulated and busy. Believers became human “doings” rather than “beings,” confusing what was perceived as productivity for spirituality. Our Lord’s Great Commission is, of course, very important, yet without a vibrant and Spirit-filled life, the sharing of the gospel becomes powerless and unconvincing. It is like trying to encourage another person to get married while personally languishing in a dull, stagnant, and loveless marriage. Furthermore, without experiencing Christ’s transforming love and abiding presence, the Christian life is meaningless. The contemplative retreat is a spiritual practice that aims to provide an environment conducive to the revitalizing of our spiritual strength by temporarily withdrawing from all distractions. The hope is that a deeper bond with the Lord Jesus, himself, will ensue. The following session will seek to understand the “desert experience”—the origins of Desert Spirituality from the Desert Fathers—and to explore how contemplative retreats could facilitate a holistic and vibrant Christian life.

Desert Experiences in the Old Testament: Elijah

When we explore the value of practicing the contemplative retreat, it is important and helpful to examine examples from both the Old and New Testaments, as well as from monastic history and practices. An Old Testament example is Elijah, who escaped from Jezebel's death threats into the desert, suffering from physical fatigue and emotional turmoil. He suffered from a spirit of fear and discouragement (2 Kings 19:1-19). Ruth Barton observes, "He [was] exhausted from the outpouring of spiritual, physical and emotional energy that this confrontation had required" (Barton 2010, 44). The angel of the Lord came twice to nurture and strengthen his body with food and water, saying the second time, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you" (1 Kings 19:7). At the end of his journey, Elijah experienced a divine encounter, not through a powerful wind, fire, or earthquake, but through the gentle whisper of the Lord. For Elijah, the desert was a place to face himself and to be strengthened by the Lord with a new perspective and thereupon receive a new mission.

Desert Experiences in the New Testament: Jesus

In the New Testament, after receiving baptism and before the beginning of his ministry, "Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (Matthew 4:1). Even the Son of God was subject to temptation. He, too, had to combat the devil. Although the devil tried to tempt Jesus three times in the wilderness, Jesus' desert experience assures us of the power of God's word to

sustain us. Whenever *we* are in the desert - a place so desolate that we are all the more allured to please all sorts of personal desires - we can remember Jesus' fight and victory. Matthew Henry states in his commentary, "Christ answered all the temptations of Satan with, 'It is written'; to set us an example, he appealed to what was written in the scriptures" (Matthew Henry's Commentary). These examples illustrate how we are to respond to whatever awaits us in the wilderness—with struggles within or without—we are to embrace the desert as part of the journey of our transformation as we cling to the power of the word of God.

Historic Monastic Practices: Desert Spirituality

Contemplative retreat is deeply rooted in the tradition of Christian monasticism. During the fourth century, Anthony (251-356 AD), one of the most preeminent figures among the Desert Fathers, withdrew to Lower Egypt into solitude and gradually retreated further to the desert wilderness (Sheldrake 2013, 52). He attracted other hermits from the nearby Egyptian desert to form a community and to worship together on Sundays. For the rest of the time, they maintained a solitary life in the desert. Belden Lane, in his book, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Mountain and Desert Spirituality*, notes that geography had played a vital role in the "attraction of desert asceticism throughout Christian history" (Lane 1999, 1).

Lane notices two important details. First, the Desert Fathers realized that God was most easily encountered in a place with no distractions. Second, the desert served as a “marvelous laboratory for dealing with the self” (Lane 1999, 1), which was the primary focus of their spiritual combat. Lane further elaborates, “How do you handle the ego and its anxiousness, its constant need for support? You walk into the desert, which doesn’t care one bit about who you are or what you bring to it. That kind of terrain offers a marvelous antidote to the problem of the ego, the false self” (Lane 1999, 1). Although the desert is a place where one expects to face hunger for food, power, and glamour, the monks and desert fathers looked at these challenges as aids in the growth of their spiritual lives— because amidst this desperation they sought (and found) God for strength and empowerment. It was in the desert that Elijah and Jesus both found strength from God’s voice, his word, and his presence.

Understanding the Contemplative Retreat and its Benefits

In her book, *Be Still: Designing and Leading Contemplative Retreat*, Jane Vennard clarifies the meaning of “contemplation.” Citing Augustine, she offers a traditional perspective and has high regard for the term: “[It is] the striving to understand and experience those things that really and supremely are” (Vennard 2000, 12). Vennard continues with a simple explanation: “Contemplation is the striving to understand and experience God” (Vennard 2000,12). This implies that one intentionally seeks and desires to know God deeply. Similarly, a

contemplative retreat is where one intentionally creates sacred space to inhabit for a particular period, in order to seek God at a deeper level through various forms of spiritual exercises and disciplines so as to deepen one's love for God and dwell in his presence. In particular, the contemplative retreat serves as a significant platform in providing space to experience God through practicing silence and solitude and practicing detachment, the dying to the flesh, the false self.

To Live the True Self, Not the False Self

Henri Nouwen states, "Solitude is the furnace of transformation... [It] is the place of the great struggle and the great encounter—the struggle against the compulsion of the false self, and the encounter with the loving God who offers himself as the substance of the new self" (Nouwen 1991, 27). When the false self is rooted in performance and the perception of others, silence and solitude provides a platform for such illusions to surface (Mulholland 2006). The "Rule of Benedict" is a document written by Benedict of Nursia comprised of precepts for instructing monks for a fruitful monastic communal life. In it, Benedict teaches that "to be silent and to listen befits the disciple."

Evan Howard, in his presentation to a group of evangelical scholars on the subject of *Evangelical Monasticism in a Postmodern World: Preliminary Considerations*, raised insightful questions, such as:

What is the role of 'withdrawal' or solitude in evangelical ministry? Is there a place for committed solitude for seasons of an individual's life? For the majority of an individual's life? For a community's life? Again, the notion of withdrawal is central to the historic understanding of

‘monasticism.’ If we are to be faithful to the term, we must address our own appropriation of the notion of withdrawal.” (Howard 2007)

It is worthwhile for the evangelical church to rethink the role of solitude and silence in the context of contemplative retreat. Many believers today have become dissatisfied with church life because so many events are not truly life-giving, resulting in a non-transformed life—as discussed earlier from Willard’s observations (Willard 2006, 107). Even worse is the issue of disillusionment. More details are further elaborated in the *Solitude and Silence* portion of the earlier section *Nurturing Contemplative Spirituality (Apophatic-Heart) through Classical Spiritual Practices*.

A Platform for Detachment: A Journey toward the Dying of the Self

In the book of Galatians, Paul reminds believers, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20-21a). A Christian’s life is meant to reflect the life of Christ, and the self is meant to experience a dying process, daily.

Belden Lane, a Presbyterian professor of theology at St. Louis University, in his interview with Christianity Today, provides two essential reasons for desert spirituality. First, we must ask ourselves, "What do we need to ignore or to let go?" and second, "What do we need to learn to love or to hold on to?" (Lane 1999, 2). Lane provides an interesting illustration in *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. A young man goes to the great monk Abba Macarius and asks, “How do

I get to be a holy man? And I want to be one tomorrow.” Macarius asks him to spend a day at a cemetery and to say abusive words to the dead. He obeys and later reports to Macarius that the dead did nothing. The young man is then told to do the same thing, but this time, he will need to say kind words to the dead, such as calling them righteous. The next day, the young man reports that the dead once again did not respond. Macarius responds, “Ah, they must indeed be holy people. You insulted them and they did not reply. You praised them and they did not speak. Go and do likewise, my friend, taking no account of either the scorn of men and women or their praise. And you too will be a holy man.” (Lane 1999, 3)

The lesson from this story also appears when we look to Jesus and Paul; they were not flattered by the admiration of people nor depressed by their scorn. Many of us are not dying to our flesh but, rather, reacting to the external or relying on the esteem of people to make us feel good. Disastrously, these have become the source of our wellness. In St. Theophan the Recluse’s chapter on “Rule for Struggling with the Passions,” he states that when we fail to be aware of the core of our spiritual life, other parts of the person’s life also begin to fail. He points out:

...Instead of fear of God and a feeling of dependence upon Him, there is a lack of fear. Instead of choosing and treasuring the spiritual, there is indifference to it. Instead of renunciation of everything, there is self-pampering... Instead of the feeling of repentance, there is insensitivity and stoniness of heart. Instead of faith in the Lord, there is self-justification. Instead of zeal, there is coldness, fatigue, and a lack of inspiration. Finally, instead of dedication to God, there is action according to self-will. (Theophan the Recluse 2006, 285)

The above describes a person driven to care for the self's interest in pleasing the flesh rather than pleasing God through living in the Spirit (cf. Galatians 5:16-17). The environment of the contemplative retreat provides sacred space for us to listen to and face the dissatisfied and distracted self. Yet this is not to say that when we go to a contemplative environment we are guaranteed to grow in holiness and be transformed. Lane warns, "It is only at profound risk—letting go, ignoring yourself and the distraction of the world—that love and compassion might occur" (Lane 1992, 5). Only through a spirit of openness and faith in the Lord can we submit our souls to the hand of the Lord.

In fact, there are recommendations suggested by the committee of CCCOWE '96 for Chinese churches in Canada, including the following: 1. Theoretical: explore the significance of Christian spirituality; 2. Pastoral actionable proposals: (A) build soul friendships, (B) seek opportunities to practice silence and solitude, (C) practice fasting; and 3. Regional/ denominational actionable proposals: host panel discussions on spirituality, host revival meetings and prayer summits (Wan, Kao, Hui and Choi 1996, 297). In light of these proposals, the holistic spiritual model mentioned above are summarized in Figures 7 and Figure 8. They emphasized the practices of experiential spirituality and contemplative spirituality and served to actualize the proposed vision suggested by the CCCOWE 1996 committee:

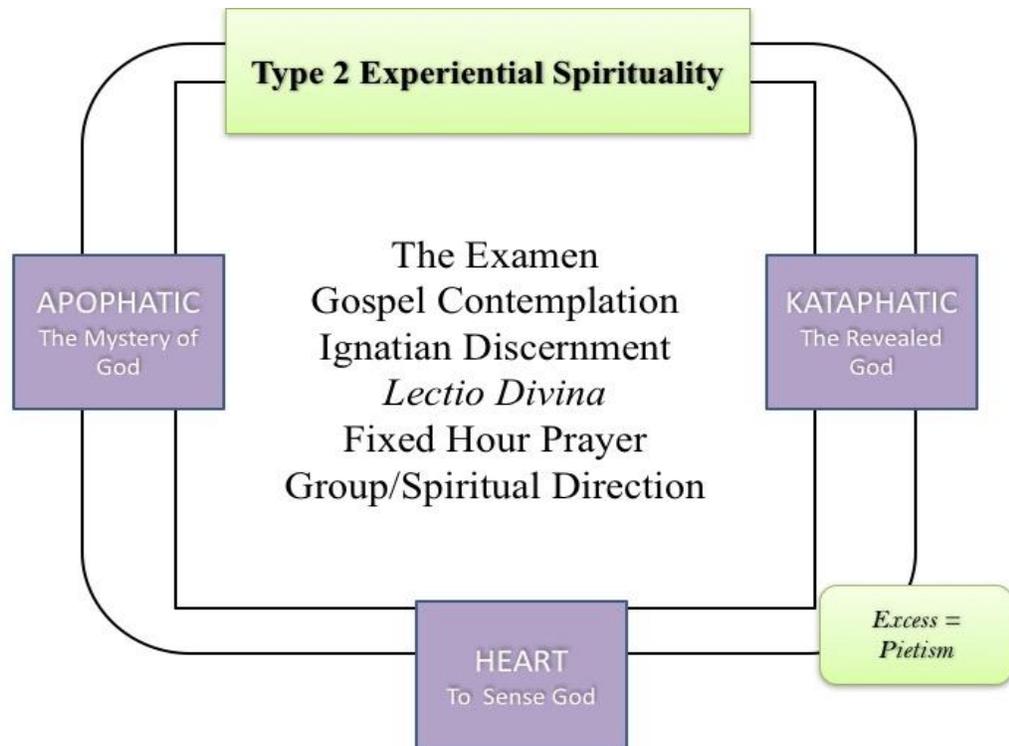


Figure 7. A Holistic Christian Spiritual Formation Model for Chinese Evangelical Church: Type 2 Experiential Spirituality, based on “Circle of Sensibility” from Urban T. Holmes (Holmes 2002, 4) & “Types of Christian Spirituality from Ken Boa (Boa 2001, 469).

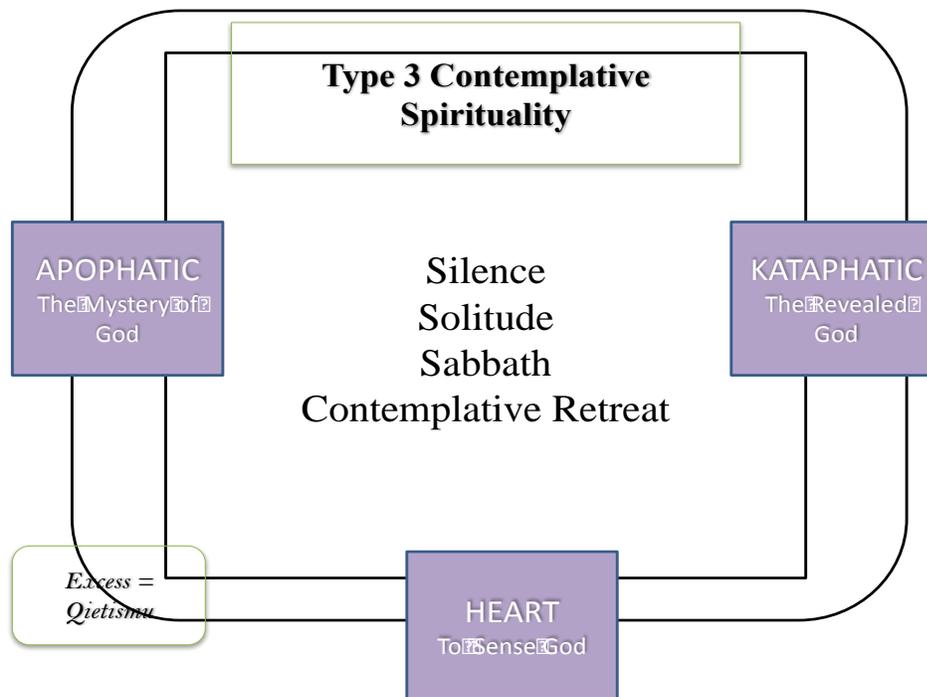


Figure 8. A Holistic Christian Spiritual Formation Model: Type 3 Contemplative Spirituality, based on “Circle of Sensibility” from Urban T. Holmes (Holmes 2002, 4) & “Types of Christian Spirituality from Ken Boa (Boa 2001, 469).

The spiritual practices featured in experiential spirituality (nurturing Kataphatic heart) and contemplative spirituality (nurturing apophatic-heart) are the opposites to the current spiritual practices of the Chinese evangelical church of my experiences, and, thus, play a critical role in improving their current spiritual formation. The common and typical programs for Chinese evangelical church retreats currently center around teaching and activities. Conversely, contemplative retreats offer a desert-like sanctuary away from numbing noise and distraction. It involves walking believers through the process of dying to one’s self and old nature. The blessing of spending prolonged time in unhindered

contemplation gives opportunity to dwell in God’s presence and tune into his voice. The following suggested schedule utilizes components of both kataphatic and apophatic approaches in an introductory three-day contemplative retreat:

Table 1. Sample Schedule for Guided Contemplative Retreat

| Time Schedule | Friday Program | Saturday Sessions | Sunday Sessions |
|---------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 7:30-8:15 | | Guided Lectio Divina | Guided Gospel Contemplation |
| 8:30-9:15 | | Breakfast | Breakfast |
| 9:30-10:30 | | Prayer Walk in Small Group | Liturgical Worship |
| 10:30-12:00 | | Silence | Five Senses Contemplative Walk |
| 12:00-01:00 | | Lunch | Lunch |
| 1:00-1:30 | | Rest | Silence |
| 1:30-3:30 | | Time with Abba | Retreat Reflection |
| 3:3—4:00 | | Silence | |
| 4:00-5:30 | Arrival & Rest | Personal Sabbath Reflection Exercise | |
| 6:00--7:00 | Dinner | Dinner | |
| 7:00-7:30 | Silence | Silence | |
| 7:30-9:00 | A Holistic Spiritual Model | Listening for God’s Voice | |
| 9:00-9:30 | Daily Examine | Guided Daily Examine | |

Appendix F provides some applicational practices that the Chinese evangelical churches that have been interviewed could consider embracing and integrating for promoting a holistic spiritual formational model. We will address

how all these spiritual practices could become more sustainable through living by a rule of life in the following session.

Living by a Rule of Life as a Means of Enhancing Holistic Spirituality in the Daily Life

In her book, *Seeking God*, Esther de Waal describes a problem:

There was no separation of prayer and life. Everything flowed from one center, that contemplative center which so many people today recognize as what they themselves are also looking for but which sadly the institutional Church with all its many organizations, its talk and busy-ness, its concern with management and efficiency and statements about issues, does not seem to make a priority. (de Waal 2001, 11)

Similarly, some Chinese evangelical Christians, with their strong emphasis on events and service, are also in danger of living this hectic and unsustainable spiritual life. Furthermore, a healthy and fulfilling spiritual life can neither be attained simply by desiring it, and it does not happen overnight. It requires a long journey of intentional cultivation—spiritual disciplines that need to be practiced daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly and yearly-specifically, to abide in a rule of life.

What is a Rule of Life?

According to Lonni Pratt and Father Daniel Homan, a rule of life is “a set of principles and actions around which we organize our lives” (Pratt & Homan 2000, 8). It could be defined as a set of “values that determine what is most important and direct your everyday actions,” “habits that are consciously formed for physical, emotional, and spiritual health,” or “goals for personal growth and improvement that you reach by acting on a specific plan of action” (Pratt &

Homan 2000, 8). Stephen Macchia, founder of Leadership Transformation, and author of the book, *Crafting a Rule of Life*, defines a rule of life as “a holistic description of the Spirit-empowered rhythm and relationships that create, redeem, sustain and transform the life God invites you to humbly fulfill for Christ’s glory” (Macchia 2012, 14). In essence, a rule of life represents our innermost desires and the most significant aspects of our lives, which is then expressed on a regular basis, forming a rhythm that provides structure to our otherwise chaotic lives. Ultimately, a rule of life functions as guide and frame that helps us to accomplish in our lives what truly matters to us.

Why Do We Need to Live by a Rule of Life?

In the foreword of Macchia’s book, Mark Buchanan describes the reality of the problem: “Most of us stumble into the kingdom with nary a clue how to do this. We thrash about, make reckless attempts, arm ourselves with slogans, goad ourselves with guilt, fail and fail and fail, and finally settle for spiritual mediocrity. Our inner lives remain cramped and musty. We resort to mere conformity, to a masquerade of piety to cover up for our lack of real Christlikeness” (Buchanan in Macchia 2012, 12). However, if we were truly serious about living a holistic life that integrates our faith into our daily living, we would be more willing and eager to adopt a rule of life that enables us to glorify God in every dimension of our lives by embracing a rhythm that helps to enable the birthing of a Christ-like life, by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Benefits of Living by a Rule of Life and the Challenges of Not Having One

According to Macchia, a rule of life is like a trellis that offers a supporting structure for a plant to grow in a desired direction in order to bear fruit (Macchia 2012, 14). Like the trellis, a rule of life “allows us to clarify our deepest values, our most important relationships, our most authentic hopes and dreams, our most meaningful work, our highest priorities. It allows us to live with intention and purpose in the present moment” (Macchia 2012, 14). A rule helps us to seek and determine what truly matters to us and offers the necessary direction to reach those aims. A rule helps us to articulate our desires, identify the ways that we intend to live, and helps us to create personal space and time with a nourishing rhythm. Even when we “fall short of these intentions, the rule becomes prescriptive, showing us how we can return to the path that we have set for ourselves and recapture our original vision” (Macchia, 2014, 14). A rule, then, is like a GPS: when we make a detour or a wrong turn, it forces us to take pause as the GPS *recalculates* our path. If our lives are disoriented or chaotic and we desire greater order and harmony, adopting a rule of life can redirect us onto the proper path. Rules can relate to our physical wellbeing, such as attending an exercise class; it can apply to our relationships, such as meeting with a mentor; or it can be a spiritual one, such as carefully planning a schedule for daily prayer.

In contrast, when we do not live by a carefully considered rule of life, we put our lives in danger of lacking purpose, direction, and order. In our postmodern world, however, we tend to value carefree living and do not instinctively wish to

conform to a rigid structure or rule. Governed by self-interest and a lack of self-control, we are more likely blown about by spontaneity and impulsiveness. St. Theophan the Recluse, author of *The Path to Salvation*, warns us of the danger of not having a rule:

Without a rule, life without a support, falls and mistakes are inevitable. For such a one, all activity will depend upon presence of spirit, understanding and desire...Therefore, where there is no rule, there will inevitably be omissions, mistakes, and pauses. With rules there is only one way: whether you want to or not, do it as you are supposed to, and it get done. There are no pauses, and the work goes forward. (St. Theophan the Recluse 2006, 216)

A rule of life gives us freedom to live out our values and life-giving desires and callings in the midst of an “overworked, overstimulated, [and] overscheduled” culture (Joan 1990, 3). The boundaries of a rule of life are meant to help us live freely.

Writing a Rule of Life

In order to live a fruitful and well-structured life that facilitates a balance between kataphatic-apophatic, mind-heart, as shown in Table 3 below, it is important for the selected Chinese evangelical Christians of the G.T.A. to prayerfully seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to reveal their existing approaches to spirituality formation. One may overdevelop or underdevelop certain approaches. A Chinese evangelical Christian can follow the steps enlisted in writing a rule of life:

Step 1: Write a prologue. A prologue is an introduction that states our mission and purpose regarding a particular calling at a given stage in life.

Step 2: Budget time. Before writing the rule, it would be helpful for us to watch how we spend our time. One method is by recording major activities of each day and monitoring them for two to three weeks to determine exactly how much time we spend on them.

Step 3: Formulate. Formulate rhythms for what we want to do with our life and time that reflect the mission and purpose that we stated in our prologue. As an example, we can consider the following template for seeking balance in nurturing spiritual life:

Table 2. Rule of Life for Holistic Spirituality

| Name: | Cognitive Spirituality (Sunday School, Seminar, Conferences, Reading, Bible Study Group, Theological Courses, etc.) | Experiential Spirituality (Examen, Gospel Contemplative, Fixed-Hours Prayer, Spiritual Direction) | Contemplative Spirituality (Solitude, Silence, Sabbath, Centering Prayer, Contemplative Retreat) | Societal Regeneration Spirituality (Social-Justice Group, Creation care, Neighbourhood Outreach, etc.) |
|-----------|---|---|--|--|
| Daily | | | | |
| Weekly | | | | |
| Monthly | | | | |
| Quarterly | | | | |
| Annually | | | | |

Step 4: Be specific. St. Theophan the Recluse offered valuable insight for writing rules of life. “The rule should be specific: which books to read, when to read them, how much to read, how to prepare to read, how to begin, continue and end the reading, what to do with what has been read” (Theophan the Recluse 2006, 214). Being specific helps us to exercise self-control as we restrict our time spent on inconsequential activities. At the same time, Simon Chan, in his book, *Spiritual Theology*, recommends that “We need to strike a balance between flexibility and perseverance, especially at the beginning of the implementation of our rule” (Chan 1998, 195).

Step 5: Experiment and Revise. Howard, in his video, *Evan B. Howard: My Rule of life*, suggests that we “play” around with our rule. As we seek to follow it, we will naturally see whether the rule can realistically be integrated into our life schedule. Where necessary, we may need to revise a rule to make it workable.

Step 6: Accountability. Find someone to hold you accountable for living out your newly devised rule(s). Try to regularly meet and share with one spiritual friend, mentor, or spiritual director.

Living by a rule of life, for both personal and ministry planning can provide a new sense of harmony and order for the Chinese evangelical Christians. The framework enables us to rethink our priorities and to do away with those activities that rob us of our primary focus. Simon Chan recognizes that the problem of the lack of spiritual disciplines and routine in Protestant churches

results in the lack of discipline (Chan1998, 194-195). Chan then emphasizes the importance of adopting a rule of life: “To embrace a rule is to make a commitment to a certain pattern of living that helps reinforce desirable habits in the long term” (Chan1998, 192). A rule of life provides hope for an orderly and peaceful life, birthed from the graces of discipline and discernment.

Fruits of Living a Holistic Spiritual Life

The journey of Christian life is a pilgrimage, in constant process of formation through our growing body of knowledge, experiences, intentional discipline engagement and relinquishment. All inner journeys of faith will be reflected by and manifested in outward living. As described by Mulholland, “Holistic spirituality is a pilgrimage of deepening responsiveness to God’s control of our life and being” (Mulholland 1993, 168). When our lives are governed by God’s spirit and are aided by disciplined spiritual exercises, we anticipate transformation in the following four areas: becoming more like Christ, experiencing peace that accompanies a holistic spiritual life, experiencing communal affirmation, and lastly, living a missional life.

Becoming More Like Christ

As we spend more quality time with God, aided by a comprehensive variety of spiritual practices, our faith grows, our love deepens, and our relationship becomes more intimate as we allow the life of Christ to shape and form us. “His character will increasingly become ours—easily, thoroughly. You

rarely find any person who has made great progress in the spiritual life that did not have much time in solitude and silence” (Willard 2014, 40). As a person who reflects on his life after engaging spiritual disciplines, he writes:

Oddly, through intentional time of practicing spiritual disciplines, my walk with Jesus has become more spontaneous. He is present in more of my day. I have loved others better, and seen progress made in overcoming anger and the desire to have things my way. In a nutshell, Jesus has greater access to and control over my life. I’m more in tune to the still small voice of the Spirit. (Willard 2014, 41)

When we constantly spend time with God, we are shaped into his likeness day-by-day. When the Spirit governs one’s life, the fruit of the Spirit begins to manifest, slowly but surely, in one’s life, that is, “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

Experience of a Holistic Life in Harmony

When each dimension of a person (thought, feeling, will, body, social context and soul) (Willard 2002, 30) is nourished and nurtured in God’s abundance, the entire person experiences a sense of harmony. As Willard describes in his book, *Renovation of the Heart*, “The salvation or deliverance of the believer in Christ is essentially holistic or whole-life” (Willard 2002, 31). This is well illustrated in Psalm 16. David speaks of himself but also prophesies about the Messiah: “I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore, my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices, my body

also rests secure” (Psalm 16:7-9 NRSV). The entire person is harmoniously coherent—body, mind, heart, and soul.

Communal Affirmation

As our lives become more God-centred, we increasingly desire God’s will, and hold onto our personal agendas less; we become less controlling and manipulative and more trustful and faithful. We grow to live lives that seek to love and honour God by submitting to him in obedience (cf. John 14). Our love for God will transform our love for neighbours. Mulholland suggests that if we want to test the extent of our spiritual growth, we need to simply examine the quality of our relationship with others as a guiding post and ask:

Are you more loving, more compassionate, more patient, more understanding, more caring, more giving, more forgiving than you were a year ago? If you cannot answer these kinds of question in the affirmatives and, especially, if others cannot answer them in the affirmative about you, then you need to examine carefully the nature of your spiritual life and growth. (Mulholland 1993, 42)

Relational life is the biggest litmus test for our spiritual maturity. A Spirit-filled person will hold him or herself accountable to people close to them.

Fruit Resulting from Missional Living

An inner life of gradual conformity to our Lord will inevitably manifest outwardly as being for others. With the Holy Spirit within, we are his agents of salt and light, bringing his healing transformation to the world. Mulholland warns that spirituality is not meant to be privatized, but to be expressed socially,

“‘Social spirituality’ designates our spiritual pilgrimage within and for the culture we live in. John Wesley repeatedly stressed that there is no personal holiness without social holiness” (Mulholland 1993, 158-159). It is an inner reality expressed outwardly through missional living in daily life, through which, we “bring good news to the oppressed, proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ...proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; ...comfort all who mourn” (Isaiah 61:1-2). Mulholland captures these desires well in the following prayer: “O God of justice and mercy, help us to see that to be conformed to the image of Christ is to be thrust out into the world as agents of his redeeming, healing, liberating and transforming grace. Help us to see that our growth toward wholeness in Christ cannot move toward its fruition apart from our life in the world” (Mulholland 1993, 158).

Conclusion

This chapter presents my observations (part 1) of Chinese evangelical churches of my ministry experiences in serving the Chinese evangelical churches in Markham and Richmond Hill. It also includes interview summaries from four pastors in the G.T.A and the academic presentation of Dr. Milton Wan. They support my observations of the churches mentioned have the dominance of cognitive spirituality and the undesirable effects of overemphasizing Christian education at the cost of neglecting other critical dimensions of spirituality. The Chinese evangelical church in this group also attempted to nurture spirituality by

encouraging outward-looking, societal regeneration spirituality, choosing to focus on conservative expressions, such as: service, community events and overseas missions. These focuses have their strengths in building a solid theological foundation and equipping believers in exercising their gifts for ministry and mission work. However, as vital these two aspects of discipleship and spirituality are, they cannot happen only externally, separate from a holistic, inner spiritual life.

A holistic spiritual formation model (part 2) features four types of Christian spirituality, derived from Urban Holmes “Circle of Sensibility,” have been used to illustrate the spiritual preferences and emphases of the chosen Chinese evangelical churches in the G.T.A. They commonly adopt *cognitive spirituality* which tends to the kataphatic-mind; and, *societal regeneration spirituality*, which nurtures the apophatic-mind.

Part 3 presents how I use experiential spirituality and contemplative spirituality as complementary to the existing discipleship model of these Chinese evangelical churches of the G.T.A. In applying experiential spirituality (part 4), it has been suggested that these Chinese evangelical churches would benefit from the spiritual model of Ignatian spirituality, which includes the use of Examen, gospel contemplation and discernment. For the purposes of cultivating affective spirituality, I also focused on the classical spiritual practices of fixed-hours prayer, *lectio divina* and spiritual direction. These spiritual practices not only

engage us in knowing the revealed God, but they also encourage praying with the Church, meditating on Scripture, and noticing God's activities in our lives.

In application for nurturing contemplative spirituality which orients the apophatic-heart, I addressed the need for the contemplative spiritual discipline of abstinence. Since some Chinese evangelical leaders and believers tend to suffer exhaustion, caused by over-participation in too many events and too much service, the wisdom of the desert fathers and their practice of asceticism may have much to offer. These classical spiritual practices include solitude, silence, Sabbath, and contemplative retreat. All the spiritual exercises encouraged here have been selected as a means for experiencing the grace of God, particularly through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, through nurturing experiential spirituality and contemplative spirituality.

I then explored how a prayerfully crafted rule of life, outlining the regular practice of the aforementioned spiritual exercises, could help the selected Chinese evangelical Christians experience and witness an abundant life in God--of being like Christ, having a holistic life, holding to communal affirmation, and living missionally. When one seeks to abide to all these recommendations, it will surely transform these believers into deeper and holistic disciples of Christ.

CHAPTER 4:
GROUP SPIRITUAL DIRECTION TOWARDS
SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE
SELCTED CHINESE EVANGELICAL
CHRISTIANS: A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
PROJECT

In my pastoral experiences in various settings, I have learned that Chinese evangelical churches I served in the G.T.A. have a distinctive pattern of emphases on Christian education programs, missional and community events, and service in ministry. Church members are well-equipped with theological and biblical knowledge, and are actively involved in their church ministries but there is a pervasive lack of sustained and daily spiritual disciplines and holistic spirituality. This research project was designed to study if group spiritual direction could deepen the participants' spiritual intimacy with God, with people, and their commitment to daily spiritual practices.

The Purpose and Focus of the Project

This section of the portfolio was intended to introduce participants to group spiritual direction—an intentionally formed spiritual community—in order to nurture intimacy with God and believers by engaging different spiritual

practices within this community. Six sessions of group spiritual direction took place during a three-month period. Before beginning group spiritual direction, candidates were asked to attend a weekend spiritual formation retreat in order to familiarize participants with the nature and purpose of group spiritual direction and different spiritual practices. Data was collected from interviews, and the notes of both the participant observer and the researcher. The candidates are from a pool of members of Hallelujah Chinese Evangelical Free Church and Toronto Simpson Chinese Alliance Church, who attended a four-month Sunday school class on Christian spiritual formation. The results showed that the participants' group spiritual direction experience did indeed help them nurture a deeper relationship with God, as well as with each other. The data also supported that they developed a stronger desire and commitment to spiritual practices in order to nurture intimacy with God, even after the project.

Opportunity or Problem

Hallelujah Chinese Evangelical Free Church and Toronto Simpson Alliance Chinese Church both focus deeply on Christian education, as demonstrated by the many different Bible courses they offer. Furthermore, their members serve in various ministries, and are heavily involved in outreach and missions. Nevertheless, such acts of seeking and acquiring biblical knowledge and engaging in service or missions, as part of Christian spirituality, must not be mistakenly equated to spiritual vitality, Christian maturity, or even faith. In my

interview with Edward Ho, pastor of Markham Chinese Baptist Church, I learned that he observed that in many Cantonese-speaking churches, members often equated biblical knowledge with being spiritual. In my interview with Kelvin Luong, lead pastor of Hallelujah Chinese Evangelical Free Church, I learned that the evangelical Chinese Christians he has worked with approached the command to love with a “just-do-it” pragmatism.

The four interviewees, presented in the beginning of Chapter 3, expressed a common thread found in their congregations: a sense of lack of spiritual intimacy with God, even in the midst of all this doing. To worsen the situation, these pastors repeatedly complained about the lack of commitment of volunteers. They are finding more people are seeking only volunteer position which requires only a short-term commitment. Following the problem, we are going to explain how group spiritual direction would be used to facilitate a deepened spiritual vitality.

Response or Innovation

The purpose of this research project is to study the impact that group spiritual direction could have on selected Chinese evangelical Christians of the G.T.A., in order to deepen their spiritual intimacy with God and with other believers, and to increase the use of specific spiritual disciplines in daily life. The nature of the group is intended to serve as a platform for practicing accountability and the specific spiritual disciplines, such as silence, reflection, and meditation.

The outcome shows that group spiritual direction, when done with a trained spiritual director or facilitator, can be of value to the local Chinese evangelical church. It is also advantageous towards the formation of deeper spiritual life by helping to nurture intimacy with God and with people, and to cultivate a greater commitment to the daily practice of disciplines. Incorporating group spiritual direction into discipleship training could be a great benefit and asset for the local church in the fostering of holistic Christian spirituality since it offers a cohesive balance of the four basic components of spirituality: cognitive spirituality, experiential spirituality, contemplative spirituality and societal regeneration spirituality (see Figure 3 to 6).

Key Definition: What is Group Spiritual Direction?

Spiritual direction is a spiritual discipline whereby a person seeks the companionship of a spiritual director to help him/her to better discern God's activity and movement, for the journey of growing intimacy with and obedience to God. Spiritual direction is an ancient spiritual practice that has existed since the time of the Church Fathers. The letters of the early church fathers—Tertullian, Ambrose and Jerome—detailed the guide they used to provide spiritual care for individuals (Dirks, 2013, 31). In the fourth and fifth centuries, Desert Abbots and Ammas in the area of Egypt, Palestine and Syria also offered spiritual seekers needed assistance, “not only for the practical matters of life in the desert, but in the inner ways of the heart” (Ward, 1990, 4). Similar to spiritual direction, group

spiritual direction gathers a group of individuals for the same spiritual companionship. These groups purposefully and deliberately establish accountability and encourage reflection on the state of their spiritual lives, exercising prayerful listening to one another and to God on behalf of each other (Grizzle 2007, 45). This is mainly practiced in a space created for silence, where individuals can practice listening and discernment.

Supervision, Permission, and Access

This research project followed the instructions and guidelines of the Research and Ethics Board of Tyndale Seminary and the administration and faculty of Tyndale University College & Seminary. The research participants were taken from two former spiritual formation classes I gave as a guest Sunday school teacher. The first class was taught from January to April 2015, at Hallelujah Chinese Evangelical Free Church; and the second class was taught from January to April 2016, at Toronto Simpson Chinese Alliance Church. I have received permission from the six participants to participate in this research project (see Appendix A). For accountability, I reported on the process and findings from the group spiritual direction project to the deacon and elder boards of both churches. I have also received permission from the pastors who accepted to receive the interview as well as to have their interviews published in this document. I also received approval from the Tyndale Research Ethics Board and specific approval from the two churches.

Context

Since 1999, I served in pastoral roles in Cantonese-speaking evangelical churches of the G.T.A. for a total of almost fourteen years. During that time, I trained small group leaders and provided spiritual formation retreats. In 2013, I completed the Certified Spiritual Direction Program at Tyndale Seminary. Thereafter, I felt led to start a ministry to help Christians address their stagnant spiritual intimacy with Christ through learning spiritual exercises. I founded “Holistic Sanctuary”—a ministry that partners with churches by providing courses in spiritual formation, spiritual direction, group spiritual direction and contemplative retreats.

Members from both Hallelujah Chinese Evangelical Free Church (HCEFC) and Toronto Simpson Alliance Church (TSAC) participated in this research study. Hallelujah Chinese Evangelical Free Church (HCEFC) was the first church to participate in this research study. This church was founded in 1989. Five Canadian families immigrating from Hong Kong, decades prior, had observed the new wave of Hong Kong immigrants and began praying for the opportunity to reach out to this demographic. The vision to plant a church to reach out to this specific community was eventually endorsed by Evangelical Free Church of America in January 1989. HCEFC’s Sunday worship services took place in a school in Scarborough for almost eight years until 1997, when HCEFC built their own church at the intersection of Middlefield and Finch Avenue.

Within nine years, the number of attendees for Sunday worship service had grown to approximately 260.

During its first ten years, as new Chinese immigrants gathering as a Christian community, the relationships among members were strong. As the church continued to grow, the church demographic began to change and it needed to meet the different needs of the second-generation, English-speaking youth. The English ministry was established in 1996. From 2002 to 2005, the church had three English-speaking pastoral staff members to shepherd the youth. However, in 2010, all three of these pastors collectively decided to leave the church because they did not see desire among the youth for spiritual growth and discipleship. Eventually, those three pastors founded their own church in 2012. Even prior to the departure of these three English pastors, the senior pastor and two associate pastors of the Chinese congregation had already resigned from their positions in 2004, 2009, and 2010 respectively. The church was badly shaken. Some members left the church during this stormy period. Needless to say, there were many hurts and broken relationships in need of healing. The loss of leaders had left a great void.

In 2012, Kelvin Luong was hired as the lead pastor for the Cantonese congregation and the church gradually began to stabilize under his pastoral care. Luong has a strong background in Christian counselling, specializing in marriage and family counselling. Furthermore, Luong became aware of the spiritual need to cultivate deeper desire and commitment to genuine spirituality that would connect

their minds and hearts, and to renew faith previously damaged by the turbulence of the past few years. The group spiritual direction research study was introduced with this context in mind, and opened to the Sunday school participants of the Christian spiritual formation course.

The second church, Toronto Simpson Alliance church (TSAC), was also planted in 1989, with approximately fifteen members—mainly new, Cantonese-speaking immigrants from Hong Kong—in the city of Scarborough. In about fifteen years, it reached its peak attendance with approximately 160-170 adult members. Upon seeing the need for a separate ministry for the growing group of English-speaking, second-generation Canadian youth, an English ministry was started in 2000. That group is currently comprised of 50-60 youth and young adults. In order to meet the spiritual needs of the new wave of immigrants from China, a Mandarin-speaking congregation was established in 2010. This trilingual church has a total of approximately 300 members in three congregations.

The project was opened to students who attended the Sunday school Spiritual Formation course that took place from January to April 2016 at TSAC. Among the approximate 160 members of the Cantonese-speaking congregation, about one-third of the people are between the ages of 45-65; and, as the longest-standing members, they play a key role in the church. The church elder who was interviewed described many of the members as spiritually stagnant and lacking desire for genuine spiritual growth. They were no longer keen on attending traditional Sunday school classes nor did they participate in ministry. According

to the elder's observation in the interview, a good portion of the people were in the class due to the novelty of an outsider coming to teach a new subject.

Model and Resources

Chapter Three offers A Holistic Christian Spiritual Formation Model for Chinese Evangelical Churches of the Greater Toronto Area, and explores four types of Christian spirituality that are then used to study the spiritual approaches of the four evangelical Chinese churches I interviewed and the churches experiences I had in the Greater Toronto Area. They are classified as the following: (1) cognitive spirituality, (2) experiential spirituality, (3) contemplative spirituality, and (4) societal regeneration spirituality.

Based on the two intersecting scales of “mind-heart” and “apophatic-kataphatic” spirituality, four types of Christian spirituality arise out of the four emerging quadrants. The top-right quadrant (Type 1), *cognitive spirituality*, blends the domains of the kataphatic and of the mind, stressing the mind's role and the fact that God is revealed. It is an intellectual spirituality that engages the mind to know the knowable God. The goal is theological renewal (Boa 2001, 469). The bottom-right quadrant is the second quadrant (Type 2), *experiential spirituality*, representing the dynamic arising out of the heart's pursuit to experiencing the revealed God. The goal is personal renewal. The bottom-left (Type 3), is called *contemplative spirituality*, and combines the apophatic-heart, engaging with the God of mystery through the practices of solitude, silence and

emptying prayer; it encourages listening. It aims to renew the inner life journey (Boa 2001, 460). The top-left quadrant (Type 4), *societal regeneration spirituality*, combines the apophatic with the mind and stirs up passion for and involvement in missional activities through actions in Christians in order to bring social transformation.

The four pastors (Or, Ho, Luong and Cheng) interviewed observed and the participants (from roughly ten opportunities to teach this model—from retreats, summer conferences and Sunday School classes in Chinese evangelical churches) testified that the present spiritual model of the Chinese evangelical churches of the G.T.A., are primarily based on cognitive spirituality and secondly based on societal regeneration spirituality, but mainly focused on missions and outreach work. This present spiritual model discussion aims to formulate spiritual disciplines that could help Christians in evangelical Chinese churches deepen their relationship with God by helping to cultivate a balance among the four types of spiritual orientations. Group spiritual direction appears in the second quadrant. It is located in the experiential quadrant because it incorporates spiritual disciplines that reflect on and engage with that which is revealed. It focuses on sharing one's spiritual experiences; discerning God's work in his, or her, life in a spiritual community, all while engaging the heart and feelings in a contemplative environment. Figure 9 below helps to illustrate three questions raised by Sheldrake regarding the context, the means, and the goal of transformation.

Type 2: Experiential Spirituality

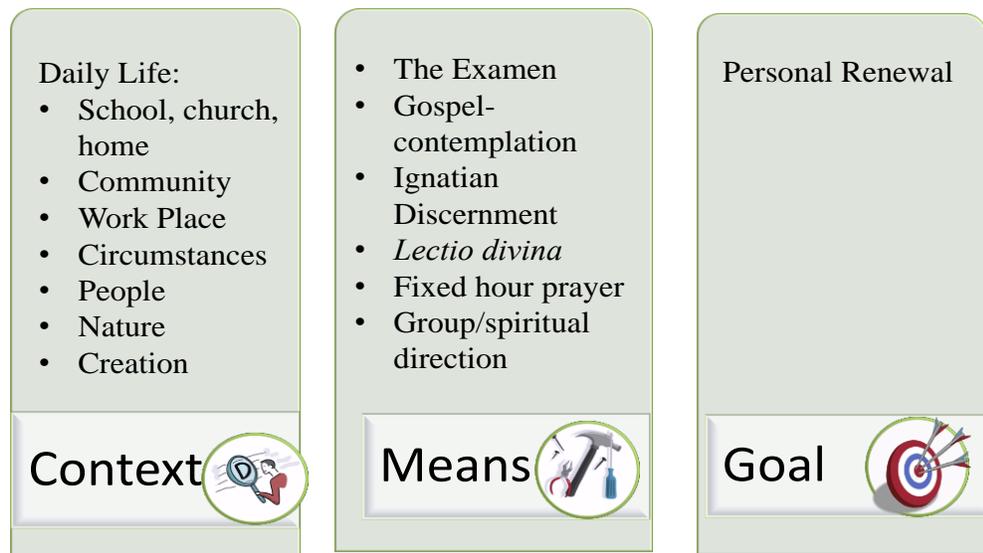


Figure 9. Type 2: Experiential Spirituality, based on “Circle of Sensibility” from Urban T. Holmes (Holmes 2002, 4) & “Types of Christian Spirituality from Ken Boa (Boa 2001, 469).

The following section explores the value of group spiritual direction, learned from Jesus Christ’s model and various resources.

Hunger for Authentic Spiritual Community

During a recent half-day retreat for pastors and deacons, one leader expressed sadness over hearing bitter comments from church members regarding other congregants within the church as “familiar strangers,” even though they had known each other for twenty-odd years. The pastors and deacons felt helpless regarding this disappointing, but honest, evaluation. Although they all worshiped,

worked, learned, and served together regularly, even they could not deny the reality that they did not deeply know their church family either. Group spiritual direction aims to provide a deeper connection for these estranged church members by facilitating intentional conversations about their awareness of God in each other's lives and discerning God's work in one another's spiritual journey. It is used to remedy the problem of being merely "familiar strangers" in a church family setting by helping people to see one another as soul companions on the same spiritual journey.

Spiritual Dialogue on the Road to Emmaus: Jesus and the Disciples

In Luke 24:13-35, Jesus showed up as a stranger amidst two disciples, distressed and bewildered about Jesus' death and missing corpse. He asked them questions to help them uncover what was troubling their hearts, corrected their false perceptions of the Messiah, and explained to them the meaning of the Scriptures from the time of Moses to the time of the prophets. At the end of their journey, when the disciples invited Jesus to stay with them, they experienced a deeper encounter with his divinity and when he disappeared, they asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32). Barton explains, this little community that grew along the road to Emmaus was "[made] up of two friends and a stranger who eventually became a friend" (Barton 2014, 47). Its secret relies deeply on our willing to practice "*inner hospitality*", which is,

...a spirit of openness and receptivity to those unlikely moment when the friendliness of a stranger or the strangeness of a friend causes our heart to burn within us. We will need to learn new ways of being in conversation that honor and care for the more tender aspects of our lives. (Barton 2014, 48)

Similarly, in group spiritual direction, we also learn this “new way of being in conversation” (Barton 2014, 48), by practicing the spirit of inner hospitality and community with others on our spiritual journey to Emmaus. Most significantly, it invites Jesus’ presence into our spiritual companionships and conversations around discernment and contemplation. As Barton describes,

Transforming community begins as we choose to walk together, trusting that Jesus is in our midst as we talk and share about ‘all these things that [have] happened.’ But it doesn’t end there. Transforming community continues to unfold and deepen among us as we ask good questions and learn how to stand still and wait with one another in the midst of shattered hope sand dreams and the great unfixables of life. There is a quality of listening and being together with Jesus in the stuff of our lives that can open us to fresh perspectives and true spiritual insights. (Barton 2014, 55-56)

Allowing Jesus to be the spiritual guide in a community of ‘strangers’—people different from you or who hold different perspectives than yours (Barton 2014, 46)—and allowing this community to then challenge and inspire our faith on the way to Emmaus is critical to group spiritual direction. It allows people the opportunity to come face-to-face with spiritual blindness that would otherwise remain hidden.

Other Resources

Ruth Haley Barton’s book, *Life Together in Christ: Experiencing Transformation in Community*, uses Luke 24:13-35 to demonstrate the usefulness

of that group spiritual direction for cultivating spiritual transformation in Christian community. In Barton's introduction, she cites a friend's observation, "Community is the most 'overpromised and under-delivered' aspect of the church today" (Barton 2014, 10). She continues to explain, "There is another overpromised, under-delivered aspect of the church today that is equally disillusioning, and that is the promise of spiritual transformation" (Barton 2014, 10). Chapter three, "And They Stood Still Looking Sad: Choosing to Listen Rather than Fix," presents convincing reasons for and benefits group spiritual direction from a biblical standpoint. In addition, Barton offers a practical procedure for conducting group spiritual direction, including instructions on how to lead it and the time that should be allotted for each session. Barton understands the challenges some evangelical Christians face as she goes through the struggles of her own spiritual journey in her evangelical spiritual tradition, and how group spiritual direction was a life-giving spiritual practice for her and can be for those who desire genuine spiritual community. The book has provided a solid biblical framework for and the practices of group spiritual direction as well as the pragmatics for group spiritual direction.

Rose Mary Dougherty's book *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment* (1995) provides practical guidelines for people craving for spiritual community to deepen their spiritual growth. In the book, Dougherty quotes Marlene Krop, a Mennonite, who explains that "a dearth of opportunity for companionship or friendship leaves people singularly ill-equipped today for

growth toward spiritual maturity” (Dougherty 1995, 12). Dougherty states that if this observation is valid, a vigorous community life is essential for discipleship (Dougherty 1995). Dougherty is an experienced trainer of spiritual directors at Salem Institute. She notes that her book is not grounded in systematic theory and research, but rather in her many years of experience as a group spiritual direction teacher. With her rich background, her book gives a sound and detailed descriptive model of how to conduct a group spiritual direction session—such as screening and orienting participants, determining the size of a group, and dealing with typical problems encountered in group spiritual direction. Moreover, the greatest value of her writing lies in her emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, and on prayer and its relationship with discernment.

Sheila M. Murphy’s Doctor of Ministry Thesis (2003), from The Catholic Theological Union at Chicago, entitled, “*Group Spiritual Direction: A Resource for Adult Faith Formation in a Parish Setting*,” is another valuable resource since its topic is similar to my research project. Murphy adopts Dougherty’s model as one of her theoretical frameworks, arguing that group spiritual direction provides a holistic approach to a believer’s faith journey. Particularly helpful is Murphy’s historical overview of spiritual direction, which includes models from the apostolic and monastic periods. In addition, her paper includes teaching material for the orientation session in the Appendix, which has been a rich resource for my research project.

Methodology and Methods

The section describes the participants who took part in this research project, the duration of the study and the strategies used for collecting data. It also includes the outline of the sequence of the project as well as the ethical considerations.

Field

Participants for the research project were taken from both Toronto Simpson Chinese Alliance Church and Hallelujah Chinese Evangelical Free Church. These participants had already taken part in a four-month course on Christian spiritual formation I had previously taught as a guest lecturer for Sunday school at each church. The research project began on September 22, 2016 with a demonstration session of group spiritual direction and a weekend retreat on October 1-2, 2016. The entire process lasted three months. The group sessions, the demonstration session of group spiritual direction, and the six interventions of group spiritual direction sessions took place at my home. The weekend retreat was held at the Home of Bethany retreat house in Sunderland. The participants included three women and three men, ranging from ages 45 to 65. Their pseudonyms are Peter, James, John, Debra, Esther and Mary. The individuals were invited through email (sent between mid-July and early August) and met all the requirements (for example, they had never participated in group spiritual

direction). The invitation email, used to solicit such demographic group for their participation of the project, had been sent out between mid-July and early August.

Scope

The project aimed to explore whether group spiritual direction would be effective in helping Chinese evangelical Christians to deepen their spiritual intimacy with God and with fellow Christians, and in increasing their engagement spiritual practices in order to deepen their intimacy with God. The results confirmed, through the project, that group spiritual direction was, indeed, helpful for individuals to cultivate spiritual listening—to God and to people—in Christian community and in daily life.

Due to the three-month time constraint of the project, the project involved six participants only to ensure quality time is allowed to study the individual experience. As a result, it also concentrated on group spiritual direction rather than one-on-one spiritual direction. The project focused on the two churches comprised mainly of those who immigrated from Hong Kong in the 1990s. Furthermore, the invitation was not opened to all congregational members but only to those who had attended a four-month course on Christian spiritual formation. This stipulation ensured that participants of the research study already possessed some basic information about spiritual formation and had already demonstrated interest in the area of Christian spirituality.

The research project did not study multiple spiritual disciplines in the area of spiritual formation. It focused specifically on group spiritual direction, like the one created for this project, in order to examine the benefits of intentionally-formed spiritual community.

Methodology

According to Tim Sensing,

Qualitative research is grounded in the social world of experience and seeks to make sense of lived experience. Qualitative researchers, then, are most interested in how humans arrange themselves and their settings and how inhabitants of these settings make sense of their surroundings through symbols, rituals, social structures, social roles, and so forth. (Sensing 2011, 57)

Based on the qualitative nature of this research project, the researcher sought to examine whether group spiritual direction supports the research question. Survey design with an ethnographic element—that is, “the study of living human beings in their social and cultural contexts” (Sensing 2011, 93)—seems most appropriate and would thus be employed to study the impact that group spiritual direction on these individuals.

Methods

For methods of gathering information, Stringer explains, “The primary data in this research are derived from interviews with primary and key stakeholders” (Stringer 2011, 104). The lists of items that he provides (including interviews, focus groups, participant observations, records and reports) appear to

be most helpful in deriving and generating researching findings for my research project in group spiritual direction (Stringer 2011, 105). With my focus group of the six participants, I conducted a pre-interview and post-interview before and after the program. Samuel Or (pastor of Grace Chinese Gospel Church of North York) was invited to be the participant observer for this project and helped to take field notes as well as to observe the entire group process. All the data collected from the interviews and field notes were used to generate reports for my research project.

In this study on the impact of group spiritual direction, the six participants from both churches made up the focus group. For the survey design, questionnaires were used as a research instrument to conduct interviews and obtain data (see Appendix C). In addition, participant observation was used as another research method for the ethnographic element of this study.

Data was gathered from four sources: (1) pre-intervention interviews before the six group spiritual direction sessions, (2) field notes recorded by both myself and the participant observer from the six group spiritual direction sessions, (3) post-intervention interviews after the six group spiritual direction sessions. The pre-intervention interviews took place during the weekend retreat. I spent approximately 30 to 45 minutes interviewing each participant about their relationship with God, their relationship with other people, and their habit of practicing spiritual disciplines. The research instrument used for the interviews is listed in Appendix C, *Questions for Pre-Intervention Interview*. Each participant

had the opportunity to assess and evaluate the quality of these three areas in the past three months.

The questions were carefully designed based on the principles derived from Herbert Clark and Michael Schober's book, *Questions About Questions: Inquiries into the Cognitive Bases of Surveys* (Clark and Schober 1991). The first principle—the “Speaker’s Meaning”—describes the oversight of speakers who “take it for granted that the addressees are to recognize what the speakers mean by what they say and do” (Clark and Schober 1991, 16). The second principle — “Common Ground”— describes the need to ensure that participants can “figure out what [the speakers] mean by considering the utterance against their current common ground” (Clark and Schober 1991, 17). For example, a question like the following, “Please describe your relationship with God in the last three months,” lies on the assumption that both the interviewer and the participant share “common ground” on their understanding and interpretation of the phrase “relationship with God.” In light of this principle, then, the questionnaires also avoided using a scale to ask participants to evaluate their relationship with God, due to the inaccuracy and subjectivity of the tool. In addition, the questions were worded simply in order to avoid too many parts or multiple interpretations, such as the following bad example, “How important is your relationship with God and how does that make you feel?”

During each session, one participant from the focus group was given the chance to share and ask questions. This opportunity was rotated among all the

participants. Furthermore, all participants were reminded to respect each other by listening without judgment (Stringer 2011, 112). Participants were encouraged to journal about their experiences within one to two days after a group session. During the process of ethnographic observation, an outside observer helped to take field notes. All the records collected from the interviews and field notes were used to generate reports for the research project.

The following section provides a sequential outline of the project:

1. Pre-interview to identify how the participants perceived their relating to God and how God was relating to them:
 - a. Note-taking
2. Orientation Session
 - a. Introduced participants to the meaning of spiritual direction and group spiritual direction (15 minutes)
 - b. Watched a demonstration of group spiritual direction session comprising of three spiritual directors and one facilitator, all who were experienced in group spiritual direction
 - c. Opened the floor for participants' questions and answers
3. Orientation Weekend Retreat (Saturday to Sunday afternoon (field notes were not kept for all teaching sessions, except the first group spiritual direction session)
 - a. Taught a session on paradigms of spiritual formation
 - b. Taught and led a session on spiritual exercises, including *Lectio Divina*, gospel contemplation, silence, and journaling
 - c. Conducted a group spiritual direction session at the retreat
 - d. Interviewed each participant for 45 minutes to an hour
4. Group spiritual direction Sessions (October to December 2016)

- a. Facilitated group spiritual direction sessions. The following outlines how group spiritual direction sessions were conducted:
 - I. **Leader:** Centering Exercises—six centering exercises listed in Appendix D (10 minutes)
 - II. **Opening Silence:** Leader closes time of silence by saying, “Come, Holy Spirit!” (3 minutes)
 - III. **Sharing:** One person shares about his or her walk with God. This is a time for open and honest reflection, for example, about the personal impact of the centering exercises, a personal struggle or challenge, or an invitation from or a response to God.
 - IV. **Silence:** Participants prayerfully listen and discern on behalf of another person (1-2 minutes), “savouring the taste of divine flavouring for whatever is on the plate” (Grizzle 2007, 44).
 - V. **Companioning:** Everyone practices silent presence. Anyone can ask a question, or offer an affirmation (including the use of a relevant Bible verse). Remember, this is not a time for problem-solving; it is a time to pay attention to what the Spirit of God is doing in this other person’s life.
 - VI. **Silent or Vocal Prayer:** Hold this person in prayer before the Lord—either through a silent prayer or a brief vocal prayer.
 - VII. **Leader:** Conclude by saying, “Thanks be to God.”
 - VIII. **All participants:** Conclude by saying, “May God forgive you, Christ renew you, and the Spirit enable you to grow in love.”

Repeat for the next person.

Note: Remember to receive each person’s sharing with quiet reverence. This sharing time should not turn into an extended discussion or an attempt to fix the other person’s problem (unless you need the person to clarify what he or she has shared about). Put your faith in God for His continual work in each person and remember what you heard in prayer! (Part of this content is adopted from the Practicum Course of Group Spiritual Direction.)

- b. Took ethnographic field notes (assisted by participant observer, Samuel Or)

- c. Collected individual participant’s reflections after each session.
5. Post-Interview: Evaluate experience and value of the group spiritual direction sessions using the research instrument, *Evaluation Form for Interview after the Six Group Sessions* in Appendix C: A Research Instrument.

Phases and Timetable

Table 3. Phases and Timetable

| Phase | Timeframe | Task | How | Who |
|----------------------------|--------------|---|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Communication & Recruiting | July 18-22 | Sent email to potential participants to solicit their participation | Email contact | Paddy to participants |
| Developing the Innovation | Aug. 1 to 30 | Research, design, and formulate questionnaires and prepare questions for interviews | Study literature | Paddy will design the questions |
| | Aug. 15 | Filled out the REB Application for Ethics Review in draft form | Completed application form | Paddy to online forum |
| | Sept. 1 | Submitted the certificate, REB application for Ethics Review | Completed form | Paddy to Chapman and REB |
| | Sept. 19 | Collected all consent forms from participants | Email follow-up | Paddy/participants |

| Phase | Timeframe | Task | How | Who |
|---------------------------|-----------------|---|---|---|
| Demonstration of Group SD | Sept. 22 | Brief teaching session on group spiritual direction Three experienced guests demonstrated group spiritual direction | Teaching and modeling | Participants guests Paddy |
| Data Collection | Oct. 1 | Participants attended a weekend retreat Oct 1 9am to Oct 2, 5pm Conducted interviews for focus group during retreat. | Interviews face-to-face | Paddy and focus group |
| Intervention | Oct. 1 to Dec 7 | Participants learnt about the spiritual model and be guided through various spiritual experiences -Group Spiritual Direction Session 1-6 | Paddy facilitated the group session and took field notes | Paddy, participant observer & focus group |
| Post-Intervention Data | Dec. 12-13 | Conduct interview with each participant to evaluate their experience. | Face-to-face interview | Paddy, participant observer & focus group |
| | Dec. 15 | Conducted a celebration session for all participants and celebrated Christmas (not-ethnographic) | Gather focus group guests: focus group shared their experiences | Paddy, guests & all participants |

| Phase | Timeframe | Task | How | Who |
|-------------------|--|--|--|------------------|
| Analysis & Coding | Sept. 27 Oct 6, 18-20; Nov. 1-3, 15-17, 29-Dec. 1 | Coded data after every bi-weekly group session | Categorizing and coding; identifying themes. | Paddy |
| | Dec. 10- Jan. 14 | Input and code data for questionnaire 2 for both groups | | Paddy |
| Interpretation | Jan. 16-21, 2017 | Filter raw data and review coded data. | | Paddy |
| | Jan. 23-31 | Interpret data for both groups | Use interpretative questions, organization review, or concept mapping. | Paddy |
| Reporting | Oct. 15, 2016 | Progress Report | | |
| | Feb 27 2017 | Draft Research Project report | | To peer forum |
| | Mar. 1-30 | Revised Research Project report based on class sessions and peer reviews | | Paddy |
| | April 21 | Submitted Final Research Project | | To Chapman |
| | April 21 | Shared report with participants | | All participants |

Ethics in Ministry-based Research

The project seriously considered the welfare of the participants from Toronto Simpson Chinese Alliance Church and Hallelujah Chinese Evangelical Free Church. The research ethics guidelines outlined in *The Tri-Council Policy Statement Regarding Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* served as the primary guide throughout this project.

Before the study began, a consent form was sent to the participants, which outlined the benefits and risks in being involved in this project. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time during the research project. They were informed that the data they shared (in the questionnaires during the interviews, and in the field notes taken during the group sessions) would be used strictly for the study of this DMin research project. In addition, when the research data had been interpreted and summarized, the complete narrative (related to their disclosures) were communicated back to them, in order for me to obtain their feedback. This helped me ensure the results accurately reflected what they shared.

The senior pastors and the elders of the board of Christian education from Toronto Simpson Chinese Alliance Church, as well as the deacons from Hallelujah Chinese Evangelical Free Church, both agreed that recruitment of participants for the research study be taken from the Sunday school classes that I had taught. Managing the dual role of pastor and researcher was not a big issue for me since I was not part of the pastoral staff at either church (though I was aware of the spiritual authority I had as a guest researcher who was also a pastor).

The Sunday school students were intentionally informed about their choice to volunteer to participate in my research project.

Findings, Interpretation and Outcome

The following section relates to the participants' reports on their relationship with God, relationships with people, and their spiritual practices in the past three months—before, and after, the intervention. The interview transcripts and field notes have been broken down into smaller units so that their meanings can be understood. Units with similar meanings are then assigned a theme. A theme is further coded by representing it with either the exact words used by the participants or words with similar connotations. A definition, formulated based on the transcripts collected, is subsequently given to explain the meaning for each of the themes. Coded themes with similar meanings are grouped into different categories. Both themes and categories were used for analysing the results.

Findings from Pre-Intervention and Post-Intervention Interviews

Three sources of information were collected during this research project. The first was interviews with each participant before the beginning of the six group spiritual direction sessions. The second was field notes taken by both the researcher and the participant observer. The third was data collected from the post-intervention interviews of the six participants upon completion of the six

sessions. The both interviews evaluated their relationship with God, with other people, and their level of commitment to practicing the spiritual disciplines.

Relationship with God in the Past Three Months: Pre-Intervention and Post-Intervention

The first pre-intervention question asked the participants about their relationship with God in the past three months. The three-month sample provided a segment reasonably long enough to shed light on their relationship with God and their spiritual lives. Of the six participants, four said they had regular quiet times for reading the Bible and for prayer (“regular” meaning anywhere from 5 to 20 minutes). Two participants said they did not have a regular practice of quiet time; they only approached God in prayer when they faced a problem or trial. Two participants described their desire to be in communion with God (“centered on God”); they occasionally saw God speaking in their workplaces and experienced spiritual comfort (“comforted in struggle”). Three people identified their relationships with God as more knowledge-based (“information-based”). Two people felt their devotion times were not sustainable; though they felt good at the moment, they did not last (“lacking impact”). One person felt they were having difficulties hearing God speak to them (“insensitive to God’s voice”), and one person felt their relating to God was routine and dull (“mechanical”). The number indicates the total amount of people responded with the theme. The results are presented below in Table 4:

Table 4. Pre-Intervention Questionnaire: Please describe your relationship with God in the last three months. Has your relationship been affected by the group spiritual direction sessions? If so, how?

| Coded Themes | Definition | #People (N=6) |
|-----------------------------|--|---------------|
| Centered on God | Desire greater communion with God; occasionally see God speaking through workplace; experience spiritual comfort | 2 |
| Experienced Comfort | Feel comforted in struggles after seeking God in quiet time | 1 |
| God Spoke through Workplace | See God speaks through workplace | 1 |
| Regular Attempts | Attempt daily devotion, 5, 10 or 20 minutes | 4 |
| Information-Based | Knowledge-based devotion, not personal/intimate | 3 |
| Lacking Impact | Feel good at first, then devotions begin to have less impact | 2 |
| Insensitive to God's Voice | Insensitive to God's voice, cannot hear God | 1 |
| Mechanical | Five minutes of Bible reading; note-taking; doing devotions feels dull | 1 |
| No Regular Devotion | No quiet time. Or only goes to God spontaneously, when encountering problems | 2 |

After the six group spiritual direction sessions, participants were asked: “Please describe your relationship with God in the last three months. Has your relationship been affected by the group spiritual direction sessions? If so, how?” Information gathered from the post-intervention interviews reflected 21 different themes expressing the participants’ individual relationships with God. These themes were then grouped into the following *four* categories from the six participants: Aware God is Present, Experiencing God, Deeper Self-Awareness, and New Spiritual Practices (see Table 5A, 5B, 5C, 5D).

Post Intervention Category 1: God is Present

Table 5A. Post-Intervention Questionnaire: Please describe your relationship with God in the last three months. Has your relationship been affected by the group spiritual direction sessions? If so, how?

| Coded Themes | Definition | # People N=6 |
|--|--|-----------------|
| Presence in Me | The participant is becoming more assured of God's continual work through individuals encountered in daily life. For example, a patient in the hospital telling John, "I see God in you." | 4 |
| God in Circumstances | The participant feels God speaking through different circumstances, which has strengthened his or her faith and kindled greater sensitivity to seeing God in daily life. | 3 |
| God in People | The participant sees God's work in companioning time during the group spiritual direction sessions as well as in everyday life. | 3 |
| God in Creation | The participant sees and feels grateful for God's creation and meditates on its beauty and goodness in contrast to a fallen world. | 2 |
| Sensitive to God's Voice | Formerly, the participant could not hear God, but now one has become more sensitive and attentive to God in life circumstances. | 2 |
| God in Everyday Life | The participant feels more at peace as he or she begins to see the ordinary things of life as a means by which God can, and does, speak. | 1 |
| Silence is Powerful for Listening to God's Voice | Silence helps to listen to God's voice | 1 |

After the group experiences, participants indicated an enriched experience of God's presence, a total 40% (Aware God is Present). This included affirmation of God's presence in their life from people, from their circumstances, from their group sessions. Also, their sensitivities and awareness of God's presence were

also enhancing through the practice of silence and their awareness of God’s work in the creation.

Post Intervention Category 2: Experiencing God

Table 5B. Post-Intervention Questionnaire: Please describe your relationship with God in the last three months. Has your relationship been affected by the group spiritual direction? If so, how?

| Coded Themes | Definition | #People N=6 |
|-----------------------------------|--|----------------|
| Experience Motivated Devotion | The participant’s experiences of God has led to a greater motivation to read the Bible and pray as well as practice silence and meditation | 5 |
| New Friendship with God | The participant feels a new friendship with God, one that is more personal and which empowers him or her to take more initiative in seeking God | 2 |
| Many God-Encountering Experiences | The participant has observed that intimate experiences of God during the three months of intervention were more frequent than the previous three years. | 1 |
| Love of God | The participant genuinely witnesses and embraces the reality of God’s love | 1 |
| Work of Holy Spirit | The participant senses the Holy Spirit working in our midst | 1 |
| Assurance of God | The participant is becoming more assured of God’s continual work through individuals encountered in daily life. For example, a patient in the hospital telling John, “I see God in you.” | 1 |
| God’s Unique Path for People | The participant sees that God has a unique plan for every individual | 1 |
| Group Platform | The participant sees the group spiritual direction sessions as an affirmative setting to experience God. | 1 |

The table above presents the participants' many experiences of God throughout the group sessions. The Experiencing God component represents a total of 30%. This number reflects their increased motivation to spend time with God in devotion as well as their genuine experiences of God's love and the work of the Holy Spirit. By witnessing the changes occurring in the lives of the other participants, they were amazed to see that God has a unique path for each individual. This helped them to recognize that God has a unique path for them in their own personal life journeys. Most significantly, they found that the group setting enabled them to experience God much more intensely.

Post Intervention Category 3: Deeper Self Awareness

Table 5C. Post-Intervention Questionnaire: Please describe your relationship with God in the last three months. Has your relationship been affected by the group spiritual direction sessions? If so, how?

| Coded Themes | Meaning | #People N=6 |
|---|--|------------------------|
| Deeper Self-Understanding | The participant has greater awareness of one's own habits and behaviors (e.g., being intolerant of others) or his/her need to foster healthier relationships | 2 |
| Group Companionship Invites Disclosure | The participant feels encouraged during <i>companionship</i> and becomes willing to open up to others. | 1 |
| Aware of Sins to Deal with | The participant is aware that God is inviting him or her to deal with sin in his or her life. | 1 |
| Letting Go | The participant tries not to have his or her own agenda but learns to let go. | 1 |

The table above shows the participants’ increased self-awareness (13%) of their relational dynamics, negative behaviour, willingness to be more open through personal self-disclosure, and sins that need to be dealt with. As a pastor who has worked with small groups for over 14 years, I can say that this degree of self-disclosure is precious and such willingness to be vulnerable is rare.

Post Intervention Category 4: New Spiritual Practices

Table 5D. Post-Intervention Questionnaire: Please describe your relationship with God in the last three months. Has your relationship been affected by the group spiritual direction sessions? If so, how?

| Coded Themes | Meaning | #People N=6 |
|-----------------------------|--|------------------------|
| Use Silence during Devotion | The participant has begun to use silence to approach God and to draw closer to Him | 4 |
| Discernment | The participant joyfully practices examen for discerning God’s movement and workings during the day | 2 |
| Centering Exercise | The participant was formerly an observer but now engages in the spiritually-enriching centering exercise of gospel contemplation | 1 |

The above table presents the participants’ newly adopted spiritual practices (17%). In particular, they started to create space for silence in spending God with God, use examen to discern God work and adopt new devotional exercises through spiritual practices that were introduced to them during the centering exercise. These practices were seldom being practiced with such level of intentionality and frequency. Figure 10 below provides a summary of the

participants' description of their relationship with God after the group spiritual direction experience:

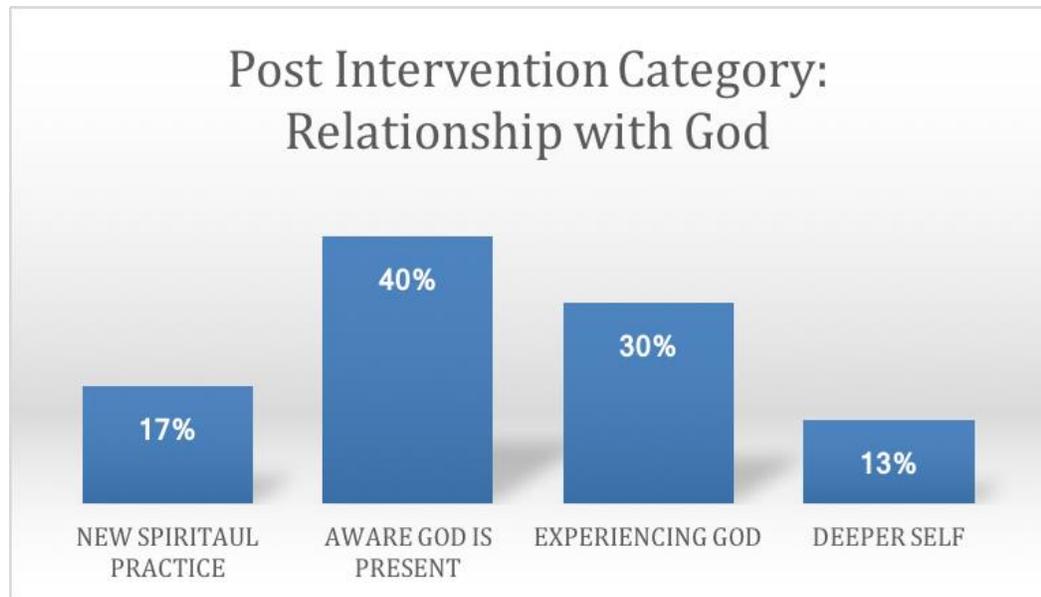


Figure 10. Post-Intervention: Participants' Self-Evaluation of Their Relationship with God

Before and After Comparison

The results show a difference between their pre-intervention experience (reflected by their chosen descriptions, “information-based,” “lacking impact,” “insensitive to God’s voice,” “mechanical,” “lacking impact”) and their post-intervention experience (reflected by “God in me,” “God in circumstances,” or “God in people,” “see God in everyday life,” and “more sensitive to God’s voice” all other descriptions falling under “experiencing God”). After the group spiritual direction sessions, a shift in the participants (with inclination of knowledge-based devotion with God) occurred to a more personal and experiential one.

Relationship with Believers in the Past Three Months: Pre-Intervention and Post-Intervention

The second pre-intervention question related to the participants' relationship with other believers in the past three months: "How did your relationship with God affect your relationship with other believers in the past three months?" The research study sought to find out whether group spiritual direction would help the participants develop deeper spiritual intimacy with others. The pre-intervention and post-intervention interview asked about the participants' relationship with other believers in general. Table 6 shows the responses of the pre-intervention interviews. In general, participants were not satisfied with their relationship with other believers, including family members and those in their local church. Four out of six participants expressed their struggles with developing close relationships. One participant, Peter, specified that his emotional distance from people was related to his struggles with temptations and sin. His distant relationship with God was a barrier to forming healthy relationships with others, including his spouse and his customers. He admitted that he was easily irritated and struggled to care for others. Another participant, Debra, shared that her weakness was self-centeredness: she made decisions without her spouse's involvement and she worked excessively (while feeling bitter about others who did not do as much as she did).

Regarding their Christian community, James found an improvement after a traumatic experience in his life. He found relationship become more harmonious and caring ("seeking harmony and care"). Mary found one member in her group

where she could be open and show sincerity (“open to others”). The other participants were also dissatisfied with their relationships at their local church. Those participants who served in ministry confessed to being task-focused, generally relating to others solely in terms of ministry needs. They considered their interactions “shallow” or “non-intimate,” meaning their exchanges were merely casual conversation. They felt they lacked “soul” friends who could offer them “soulful” conversations. Soulful conversations enable us to explore the deepest part of our innermost being and these kinds of journeys help us live more authentically (Benner 2011, 51-52).

Table 6. Pre-Intervention Questionnaire: How did your relationship with God affect your relationships with other believers in the past three months?

| Themes | Meaning | # People N=6 |
|--------------------------|--|-------------------------|
| Struggles | Disappointing and worrying others; being critical of others, causing barriers | 4 |
| Disconnection | Lacking motivation to relate to people; being aware of wrongful approaches to relationships; sensing disconnection | 2 |
| Seeking Harmony and Care | After an impactful event, relationships became more harmonious and caring | 1 |
| Open to Others | Learning to be open and sincere to a group member | 1 |
| Ego-Driven | Being self-centered when relating to people; making decisions without involving others | 3 |
| Shallow/Non-Intimate | Lacking depth in relationships; lacking (a) ‘soul’ friend(s) (i.e. daily interactions are casual only) | 3 |
| Cognitive-Driven | Using the mind only; lacking compassion and understanding | 1 |

| Themes | Meaning | # People N=6 |
|------------------|---|-----------------|
| Ministry-Focused | Tendency to share about ministry-related tasks only; minimal sharing about personal spiritual matters | 2 |

During the post-intervention interviews, 19 themes were found in the responses to the question: “*How did your relationship with God affect your relationship with other believers in the past three months?*” The themes were classified into two categories: 1. People within group spiritual direction; and 2. the believers outside the group.

In the first category, most participants found that the group spiritual direction setting provided a safe place for them to have spiritually meaningful experiences. In it, they practiced, witnessed, and experienced deep listening and honest self-disclosure. They became aware that one participant’s willingness to be vulnerable during a group session inspired others to open up and share their struggles, and, thus, deepening the relationships within the group. Another finding was that the participants were encouraged by the *companioning* sessions because members offered uplifting remarks to each other, asked a question after a participant’s sharing to clarify the matter, or shared an appropriate Bible verse, instead of trying to solve the person’s problem. This spirit of *companioning*, rather than that of “problem solving,” helped to deepen the relationship among the group members. Another important event was the transformation of one participant. The transformation amazed another participant, who then developed a greater desire to draw closer to the Lord, wanting to experience His power in his

or her own life (this outcome was reflected in the previous section when participants evaluated their relationship with God, coded *Experienced Motivated Devotion*). The results based on the data also showed that the participants treasured the dynamics in the group spiritual direction sessions. The group sessions provided an environment to experience the truth of God's unique journey with each person, the opportunity for each person to hear his or her own soulful stories, and a place to exercise discernment in community.

Relationship with Believers in the Past Three Months: Post-Intervention

Based on the response from the post-intervention interviews, the result can be divided into categories: (1) their relationship with the group members and (2) their relationships with people outside of the group. It can be seen in the following tables (Table 7A and 7B):

Relationship with Group Members

Table 7A. Post-Intervention Questionnaire: Do you sense that your participation in group spiritual direction has affected your relationships with other believers? If so, how?

| Coded Themes | Meaning | #=People N=6 |
|---------------------------------|--|-------------------------|
| Safe Environment | Group as a safe place for in-depth disclosure (deep listening and sharing) | 4 |
| Group Transformation | Encouraged by the transformation in group members | 2 |
| Companionship and Prayer | Encouraged by group members' companionship and prayer | 2 |
| God's Unique Path | God has a unique path for each person | 2 |
| Platform to Pursue God | Group as a platform to pursue God | 1 |
| Members' Stories | Encouraged by listening to group members' personal stories | 1 |
| Group Witness Prevents Judgment | Witnessing transformation in members prevents critical judgment of others | 1 |
| Soulful Stories | Opportunity to glimpse into another person's soul | 1 |
| Community Discernment | Group experiences discernment as a community | 1 |

Relationship with Other People Outside the Group

Table 7B. Post-Intervention Questionnaire: Do you sense that your participation in group spiritual direction has affected your relationships with other believers? If so, how?

| Coded Themes | Meaning | #=People N=6 |
|--|--|-------------------------|
| Practice Silence and Discernment | Use of silence and discernment to relate to people | 3 |
| God Speaks through People | God speaks through group members and other people | 2 |
| Spiritual Practices Improve Relationship | Spiritual habits help to improve relationships | 2 |
| Openness in Relationship | Openness in other relationships | 1 |
| More Comfortable with People | More comfortable with people in general | 1 |
| More Spiritual Sharing | Encountering God motivates spiritual sharing with others | 1 |
| Desire to Serve and Journey with Others | Personal transformation gives rise to desire to serve in ministry and to practice companioning with others | 1 |
| More Spiritual Fruit | God's love motivates the self to be more loving, patient, and grateful | 1 |
| Deeper Sharing | Deeper sharing with people outside the group | 1 |

With regard to the participants' relationship with believers outside the group after participating in the group spiritual direction sessions in the past three months, half of the participants said they "used silence and discernment to relate to people" (see Table 7B). For instance, Peter said, "Before, I used to give feedback and rational responses to people; now, I use silence and discernment to relate to people... It is very powerful." Debra said, "In ministry meetings, instead

of praying at the beginning and at the end, we waited for a week and discerned God's guidance together." It was encouraging to see them apply what they had practiced during the group spiritual direction sessions with people and in ministry. In the post-intervention interview, Mary shared that her "encounters with God motivated spiritual sharing with others." Likewise, Esther shared her readiness to explore "deeper sharing" with her pastor.

It is encouraging to find that the participants continued these learned practices and experienced greater spiritual intimacy with other believers even after the intervention. Overall, participants became more comfortable and open with other people. Two participants said that their stronger commitment to practicing the spiritual disciplines improved their relationships with their respective spouses. After experiencing God's love, they desired to be more loving and kind toward their spouses. One participant shared that when he rekindled his relationship with God, the emotional barrier with his spouse was greatly removed.

Although spiritual intimacy *within* the group improved, the participants, nevertheless, struggled to capture the same experience with believers outside the group. It was difficult to replicate the results since others had not been equipped, or prepared, to engage in deeper spiritual conversations. For instance, when a member of the group was excited about her experiences in group spiritual direction sessions, she tried to introduce the concept to other believers in her ministry. To her disappointment, it did not succeed. Rather than trying to practice listening, then praying and discerning as in group spiritual direction, these other

believers tried to fix each other's problems—as they were accustomed to do. The immediate application of the learned practices from group spiritual direction did not work in ordinary circumstances. Nevertheless, the experience of group spiritual direction has enabled the participants to seize opportunities to practice soulful conversations. The intentional practice of silence, discernment, and an opening spirit, along with the desire to journey with others as described above, are all significant components of group spiritual direction. They definitely empowered the participants to seek deeper connections with one another, which consequently unearthed among them a deeper joy and intimacy within their spiritual communities.

Spiritual Practices in the Past Three Months: Pre-Intervention and Post-Intervention

The third pre-intervention question was the following: “In the past three months, did you have any regular spiritual practices (e.g. times for prayer, silence, solitude, meditation, devotion, or retreat)? The question sought to understand the participants’ level of commitment to and means for spiritual practices if, or when, they spent time with God. Ten themes characterized their descriptions of their spiritual life (see Table 8). Four participants’ time spent on devotion was ranged from five to twenty minutes daily. Even though they did their devotions frequently, participants described this devotional time as impersonal and inefficient (coded as “information-based,” “no impact on prayer,” or “dull and routine”). Although two out of six participants admitted that they did not

habitually practice the spiritual disciplines, half of all the participants indicated that they desired to develop a more intimate relationship with God, but lacked the means to do so. In the presence of struggles, two participants described their experiences of God's word comforting them ("experienced comfort") when spending time with him and hearing God speak through circumstances at work.

**Spiritual Practice in the Past Three Months:
Pre-Intervention**

Table 8. Pre-Intervention Questionnaire: In the past three months, did you have any regular spiritual practices (e.g. times for prayer, silence, solitude, meditation, devotions, retreats, etc.)?

| Coded Theme | Meaning | # of People N=6 |
|-------------------------------|--|----------------------------|
| Regular Attempt | Daily quiet time ranged from 5 to 20 minutes, 5 to 6 days a week | 4 |
| Experienced Comfort | Feel comforted in struggles after seeking God in quiet time through YouTube videos. | 1 |
| God Spoke through Workplace | See God speak through workplace | 1 |
| Desire God but Lack Methods | Greatly desires to spend time with God but lacks ability/means to do so | 3 |
| Lacking Desire | Little or no motivation to spend time with God | 2 |
| Mind-Based | Knowledge-based devotion; seek God only when encountering life problems; feel overwhelmed by personal issues | 2 |
| Insensitive to God's Presence | Feel distant from God; unable to hear God's voice | 2 |
| No Commitment to Prayer Life | Non-existent or inconsistent prayer life (1-2 minutes occasionally) | 2 |
| Dull and Routine | Doing devotions feels ritualistic; spiritual life remains stagnant | 1 |

| Coded Theme | Meaning | # of People N=6 |
|--------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| No Impact on Prayer Life | Despite maintaining a devotional life, see little impact in spiritual growth; doing devotions feels mechanical; disappointed by seeing little fruit | 1 |

**Spiritual Practice in the Past Three Months:
Post-Intervention**

During the post-intervention interviews, the results regarding the spiritual practices of the participants were summarized in sixteen themes and these themes are categorized in four areas relating to the spiritual practices: Commitment, Discernment, Desiring God, and Newly Adopted Spiritual Practices (see Table 9A, 9B, 9C and 9D below).

Post Intervention Category 1: Commitment

Table 9A. Post-Intervention Questionnaire: Has your participation in Group Spiritual Direction impacted your commitment to practicing the spiritual disciplines in your Christian life? If so, in what way or to what extent?"

| Coded Themes | Meanings | # of People N=6 |
|---|---|----------------------------|
| Committed More Time and Prioritized it More | To spend more time with God even when life is busy | 3 |
| Not Changed in Quantity but Quality | The quantity of time spent with God did not change, but the quality of time (more enjoyable) spent with God increased | 2 |
| Attempting with Greater Desire | Greater desire to spend time with God although it has not happened yet | 1 |

Post Intervention Category 2: Discernment

Table 9B. Has your participation in group spiritual direction impacted your commitment to practicing the spiritual disciplines in your Christian life? If so, in what way or to what extent?

| Coded Themes | Meanings | # of People N=6 |
|--|---|----------------------------|
| Discernment | Finding oneself practicing discernment constantly | 1 |
| Greater Spiritual Clarity | Whereas one used to merely relate past events, one now tries to understand these events by discerning God's work in and through those events. | 3 |
| Attentive to God's Voice in Daily Life | Becoming more attentive to God's voice in daily life | 1 |

Post Intervention Category 3: Desiring God

Table 9C. Post-Intervention Questionnaire: Has your participation in group spiritual direction impacted your commitment to practicing the spiritual disciplines in your Christian life? If so, in what way or to what extent?

| Coded Themes | Meanings | # of People N=6 |
|--|--|----------------------------|
| Greater Desire to be in Close Relationship with God | One desires everyday would be in close relationship with God, in work and in life. There is a greater intention and attempted effort | 4 |
| Better Quality Time and Satisfactory Devotional Time | Finding devotion more enriching and satisfying. Enjoying relationship with God, instead of focusing on the quantity of time spent with Him or on completing a task | 3 |
| Enjoying Intimate Friendship with God | God is like a close friend, a close intimate relationship | 1 |

Post Intervention Category 4: Newly Adopted
Spiritual Practices

Table 9D. Post-Intervention Questionnaire: Has your participation in group spiritual direction impacted your commitment to practicing the spiritual disciplines in your Christian life? If so, in what way or to what extent?

| Coded Themes | Meanings | # of People N=6 |
|----------------------------------|---|--------------------|
| Journaling | Beginning journaling for want of feeling more deeply in one's relationship with God | 3 |
| Silence, Solitude and Meditation | One enjoys silence, solitude, meditation and prayer time to feel close to God | 3 |
| Examine | One practices Daily Examine, reflecting on consolation and desolation experiences, and trying to feel God's presence. | 2 |
| Waiting and Listening Prayer | Waiting and listening, rather than ceaselessly speaking a long list of needs | 1 |
| Gospel Contemplation | Trying to play different roles through gospel contemplation. Felt a widened experience of God. | 1 |
| Sunday School | Increased devotion to Sunday School for wanting to learn more about God. | 1 |
| More Enriching Prayer Practice | One learns more prayer practices and feels prayer life more enriching. | 1 |

The data from the post-intervention interviews revealed that half of the participants showed a greater desire for and commitment to their practice of spiritual disciplines. *Commitment* described how participants prioritized practicing the spiritual disciplines in order to spend quality time with God. Three participants indicated that devotional time had a higher priority after the sessions, and they devoted more time to it. A sense of dutiful obligation transformed into genuine thirst for God. A participant shared, "In the morning, the first thing I do is

devotions. Before, I used to say, “I must do it!” Now, I really want to do it even when I am busy. As I quiet down, I read the Bible, then meditate. Now, I do devotions almost seven days a week, occasionally skipping one or two times. I desired this style long time ago...” Two people did not change their quantity of time, but felt that the quality of their time spent with God had improved. One person only grew in desire but did not undergo significant change in daily rhythm yet.

Discernment refers to the ability and desire to perceive spiritual matters or the movement and ways of God. Interestingly, half of the participants described their improved ability to discern God’s voice and have better spiritual clarity. Peter said, “God revealed a message to me during quiet time about something I did not know before.” Esther said, “Ordinarily, I just share and report events that have happened during the year; but now I use discernment, trying to understand the message that God is trying to communicate to me through those events.” The theme, “desiring God,” is crucial as it reflects the motivation for spending time with God. Four participants reported that they grew in desire to cultivate more intimacy with God. Debra said, “God is like a close friend. We are in a close and intimate relationship.” Likewise, Peter said, “Every day I desire to be in a close relationship with God, in work and in life.” Three of the participants considered their quality time with God improved and more satisfactory. Desire is a significant factor in determining the level of commitment. The last category, “newly adopted spiritual practices,” refers to the new spiritual practices that the

participants have learned to embrace as a means of approaching God during devotional time as well as in daily life. Predictably, participants learned to adopt many of the centering exercises taught during the weekend retreat as well as during the group spiritual direction sessions. Consequently, their devotional life became more contemplative as they sought to notice and rest in God through silence, solitude, meditation, and gospel contemplation. In the post-intervention interview, Peter said, “Now devotion is not limited to the Bible, but I also practice silence and meditation.” Other participants shared similar sentiments regarding being taught about other spiritual disciplines. James stated, “Silence has deepened my relationship with God.” Similarly, Debra said, “I really enjoy solitude, meditation, and prayer time; they make me feel so close to God.”

Another encouraging finding was that half of the participants started journaling regularly, although there were no instructions to do so. Peter shared his excitement about picking up the practice of journaling again: “This spiritual practice is a huge breakthrough for me; now, I do journaling, daily. This is my first time journaling since primary school. I feel so joyful and grateful to reflect on my experiences.” Mary also shared, “I began journaling because I wanted to deepen my relationship with God.” By journaling, participants were stimulated to reflect on their daily experiences, which helped them recognize God’s work in their lives, further helping them to deepen their experiences of God. They felt inspired to cherish their spiritual encounters and record them. Overall, it was very encouraging that each participant reported various levels of impact when asked

the research questions. They revealed deepened spiritual intimacy with God and with other believers and strengthened commitment to practicing spiritual disciplines. On the other hand, one participant had a special need in his's situation, group spiritual direction could be only a catalyst that become impactful during the needy time. John expressed his reservations in making conclusions regarding the overall impact group spiritual direction had. Though he did experience some renewal, he preferred to measure the longevity of the impact he experienced after a longer period of time.

Findings from Group Spiritual Direction Sessions

This portion presents findings based on the researcher and the participant observer's field notes during the six intervention sessions of group spiritual direction. All the field notes collected about the group, during the sharing and companioning sessions, totaled 397 entries. All these entries were coded into themes, and then further grouped into different categories.

The first category, "intimacy with God," had the largest entry, representing 55% of the 397 entries, including the themes "drawn to God," "encountered God," "presence of God," "transformation," and "Holy Spirit." The second and third categories, "relationship with people" and "inner life disclosure" were equally represented at 20%. The category of "spiritual practices" had a relatively lower percentage (5%) in comparison to the categories. Table 11 presents the four categories into which the sharing during group spiritual

directions were organized, the descriptions of each category, and the different themes that emerged from the data. These categories are: “intimacy with God”, “inner life disclosure”, “relationship with people”, and “spiritual practices”.

Table 10. The Four Categories of Themes Arise during Group Sessions and Their Descriptions

| Category | Definition |
|--------------------------|---|
| Intimacy with God | Participants experienced different dynamics with God but specifically experienced comfort. The themes are: Drawn to God, Encountering God, God’s Presence, Transformation, and The Holy Spirit. |
| Inner Life Disclosure | Participants disclose their inner life. The themes are: Awareness of Ministry Pattern and Personality, Personal Struggle/Pain, Temptation/Sins, Weakness and Desire for Spiritual Growth. |
| Relationship with People | Participants experienced different dynamics within the group and outside the group. The themes are: God in Community, Member Intimacy, Explored Deeper Self, Experienced/Desired Growth in Community, and Consoled Community and Consoled Relationship. |
| Spiritual Practices: | Participants expressed their enjoyment of and commitment towards certain spiritual practices. The themes are: Desired/Committed Greater Effort in Devotion, Enjoyed Means and Powerful Spiritual Exercise. |

The greatest proportion of entries fell into the category “intimacy with God,” with 217 entries. It consisted of 55 % of all the content shared during the group sessions, as shown in Figure 11 below:

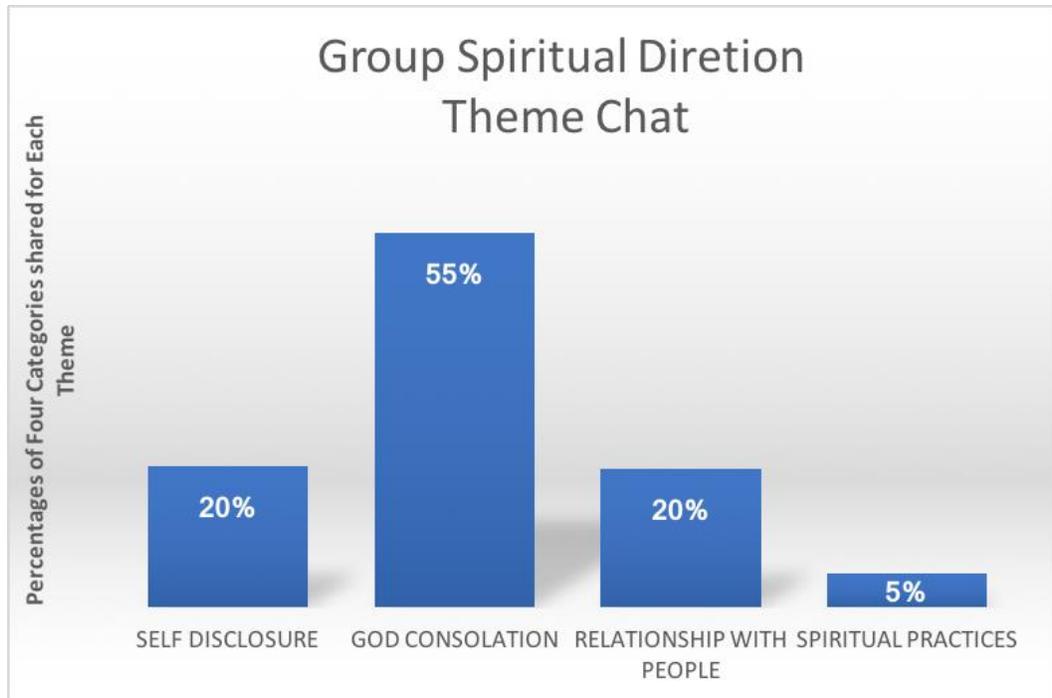


Figure 11. The Four Categories of Themes during Group Sessions in Percentage

All the themes and its definitions are listed in Table 11, 12, 13 and 14, and visual charts are also listed in Figure 13, 14, 15 and 16. The results showed that participants were able to sense their relationship with God, as evidenced in their articulations. They described their experiences of God inviting them to rest in Him or to focus on Him. They used more vivid language to describe even more dynamic encounters with Him, such as when Debra said: “I heard God say, ‘You can’t overcome by yourself.’” Participants were comfortable describing their intimate experiences with Jesus (coded as Presence of God). Esther described her “*thin space*”—a place where men and God meet closely—experience: “During the daily examen, I did not want to leave my sense of intimacy with Him; instead, I

wanted to stay with Him and to dwell in His forgiveness.” Also, in the group, members affirmed each other by witnessing changes in one another. For example, someone affirmed Mary’s sharing (coded as “transformation”): “I feel God's grace for you in that you are able to confess that you are a “fake Christian.” You see Christ’s love, sacrifice and humility, and that is the essence of the gospel; you really see the meaning of the gospel and now you desire an authentic relationship with Him.”

Among the five themes, although the theme of “the Holy Spirit” was least mentioned, it does not necessarily mean it was the least important or had the least effect on their spiritual lives. The word “God” was commonly used during the reflection session, when participants spoke about their experiences of God working in their lives. Some concluding remarks were: “I see God being so real. My knowing God has been so enriched,” “I feel very intimate with Jesus, he is so humble,” and “I see the work of God in the midst of transformation.” (See Mark’s comment) Though God’s work is the work of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit was only named occasionally. This is one example of a participant’s experience of the Holy Spirit: “The work of the Holy Spirit was very strong. It is normally hard to know, but this group experience made it more concrete.” It was encouraging to see the participants become more sensitive to God’s presence in the variety of dynamics provided by the different practices of centering, silence, companioning, and listening prayer as provided by the intervention sessions.

Table 11. Description of Themes for Intimacy with God

| Themes | #Freq. N=217 | Descriptions |
|-----------------|-----------------|--|
| Drawn to God | 72 | When participants felt God’s invitation to spend time with Him, to desire Him, to rest in Him, to love Him more, or to focus on Him during challenges. |
| Encountered God | 70 | When participants had substantial experiences of God, including “seeing God at work in one’s life,” "hearing Him," or "feeling His love”. |
| Transformation | 49 | When participants noticed changes in, or growth of, another member, or when participants shared about their positive dynamics with God. |
| Presence of God | 21 | When participants felt very close to God, very centered in God, or felt the presence of God. |
| Holy Spirit | 5 | When participants sensed the work of the Holy Spirit. |

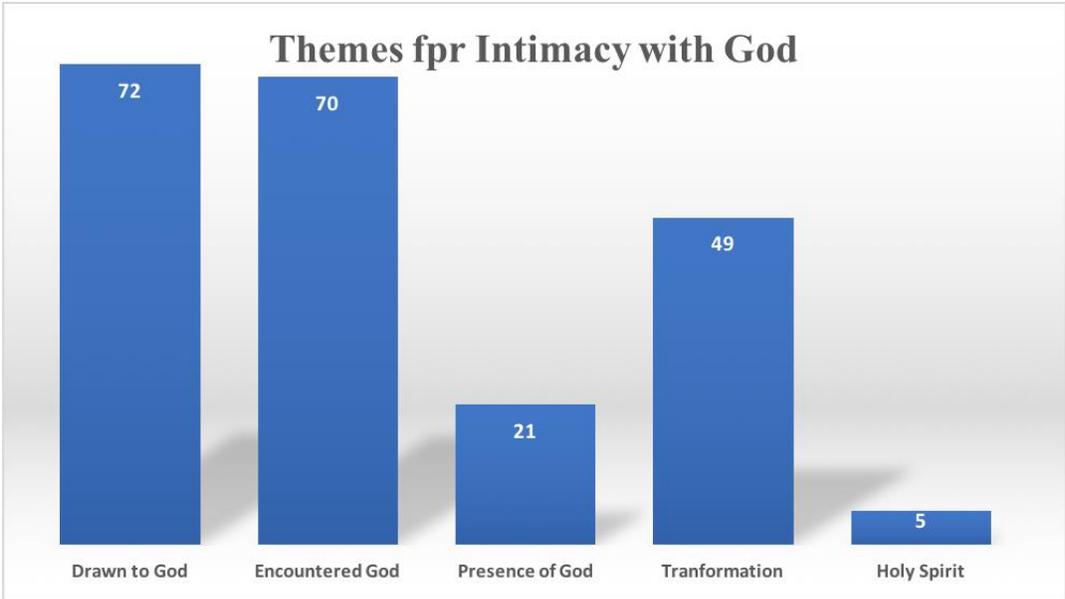


Figure 12. Themes for Intimacy with God within 217 Entries

Table 12. Description of Themes for Inner-Life Disclosure

| Themes | N=81 | Descriptions |
|--|------|--|
| Personal Struggle/Pain | 30 | Faces struggles and pain, for examples, wants to please God but cannot, resulting in frustration and feeling torn apart. |
| Weakness | 22 | Is aware of bad habits, for example, “I am imprudent, impatient, and impulsive.” |
| Temptation/Sins | 14 | Is aware of particular temptations, sins and distractions. |
| Desired Spiritual Growth | 11 | Desires to grow in Christ, to spend more time with him, and to gain more spiritual knowledge. |
| Awareness of Ministry Personality Patterns | 4 | Is aware of positive and/or negative patterns within one’s ministry and/or personality. |



Figure 13. Themes for Inner Life Disclosure within 81 Entries

Inner life disclosure represents the participants’ openness about their inner lives. There is a total of 81 entries, as shown above in Table 13 and Figure 14.

The top three noted themes are “personal struggle/ pain,” “weakness and temptation/sins.” The two participants shared the following during the last session and these were coded as “temptation/sins.” Peter said, “I am a very pessimistic person, I never see hope in life and feel trapped by bondage, temptation and negative thoughts... There are tears in my struggles, but God gave me light and hope.” Debra shared, “I became aware of my wanting to seek praise from my ministry team. I worked very hard, and, as a result, became very fatigued.” James also disclosed his personal weakness in his relationships in ministry. He shared, “I did not treat people as human, but more as ‘ministry machines’ to get the job done. This became evident when my co-worker died, and I realized I did not know him as a person but had treated him as a ‘function’ to produce results. While I was packing up his belongings, I discovered that I had not known him.” It was extraordinary to see people reach such depths of vulnerability and connectedness when disclosing their struggles of personal and relational weakness, for it is not common for Chinese or Chinese Christians to reveal their inner struggles. Instead, it is more common to hear people experience interactions typically as “disconnected,” “shallow/non-intimate” or “ministry-based” (as coded during the pre-intervention interviews when asked to describe their relationships with believers in the past three months).

There are two famous Chinese idioms that reflect Chinese’s face-saving culture: “Men can’t live without face, trees can’t live without bark,” and, “A family’s ugliness (shame) should never be publicly aired.” The idea of “face” or

personal esteem is known as ‘mianzi’ in Mandarin. In the journal article “Public face and Private Thrift in Chinese Consumer behavior” by Li Lin, Dong Xi and Richard Lueptow (Lin, Xi and Lueptow, 2013, 538), they explain:

Mianzi can be defined as ‘the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself’ (Brown and Levinson, 1978, p. 66). It is the public performance or representation of self, a social attribute and public image obtained through interactions with others (Goffman, 1967; Chou, 1996). ‘Positive face concerns the desire to be appreciated and approved of by selected others’ (Tracy, 1990, p. 210). In the context of Chinese culture, mianzi is about the dignity of a person, which is more important than physical appearance and profoundly affects the personal networks of informal favourable social bonds (known as ‘guanxi’) that benefit one’s social standing, career or business opportunities. (Davies et al., 1995; Yeung and Tung, 1996; Tsang, 1998; Cheng et al., 2011)

The two commonly known idioms mentioned above reflect a culture that does not encourage confessing that makes one lose “face”—to feel shame or embarrassment—but rather encourages protecting oneself against any sense of exposing shame. Thus, as a Chinese Christian, it is precious to see people perceive group spiritual direction as a safe place to reveal personal struggles and weaknesses. It is a sharp contrast to what they shared in the pre-intervention interviews, where the themes coded regarding relationships were “shallow/non-intimate,” “cognitive-based” and “ministry-focused.” The growing openness encouraged others to do the same, as they experienced a growing sense of trust and safety within the group as more members traded “face” for vulnerability and intimacy.

The category of “relationship with people” had 80 entries and was similar in proportion to the category of “self-disclosure.” “Relationship with people”

explored the dynamics related to people from within the group and outside the group. There are five themes listed in Table 13 and a visual chart in Figure 14 below:

Table 13. Description of Themes for Relationships with People

| Themes | # Freq. N=80 | Descriptions |
|---|-------------------------|---|
| Explored Deeper Self | 19 | When members asked each other questions to help explore their inner life (of struggles, temptations, etc.) more deeply. |
| Member Intimacy | 18 | When members expressed trust in the group and a willingness to be vulnerable; when they shared about the helpfulness of the group. |
| Experienced/Desired Growth in Community | 17 | When members recognized the need and value of intimate community to help them grow, and connect with God. |
| Consoled Relationship | 17 | When members experienced personal transformation, which led to improved relationships. |
| God in Community | 9 | When members saw God at work in people's lives, and experienced God speak through <i>companionship</i> ; when the Holy Spirit was made visible through interactions within the group. |

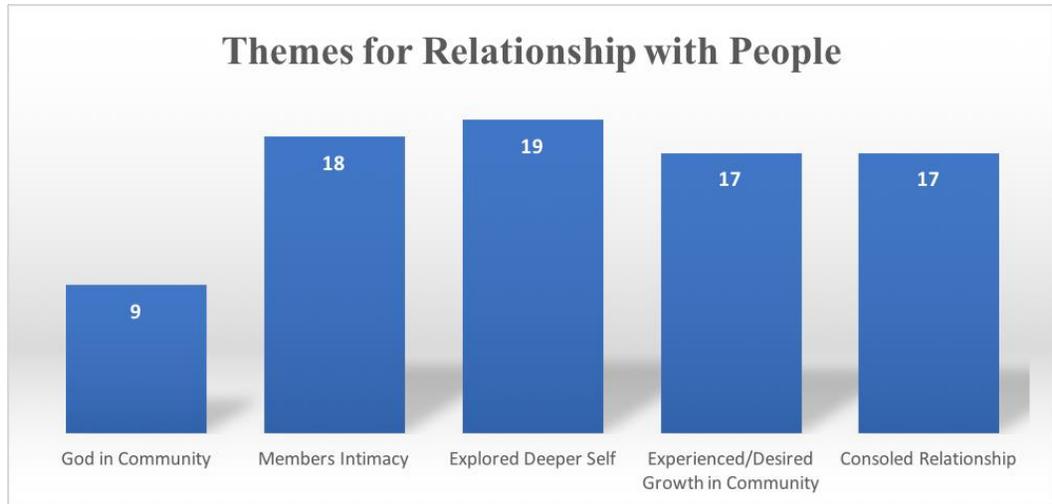


Figure 14. Themes for Relationship with People within 80 Entries

All five themes were related to members’ experiences with people, as shown above in Table 13 and Figure 14. As group members became more comfortable with the group format and with one another, some started asking questions prompting deeper reflection of one another’s inner life. Most of these were coded, “explored deeper self.” Some examples of the questions during the sessions are:

- What are your struggles and how is God helping?
- Does your relationship with your father influence your relationship with our Father?
- Is your disappointment with God or self?
- What happened to your fear after seeing Jesus?

The growing sense of trust and intimacy resulted in participants caring to know each other on a deeper level than that of mere facts, and becoming daring enough to probe one another with challenging and personal questions.

Such formational questions and vulnerable sharing could also have contributed to the growing sense of group intimacy (coded as “member intimacy”), since some felt they had seldom, if ever, shared like this before in a group setting. For example, James said, “I have never had the chance to share on such a personal level in church...I have never experienced depth like this in a group; it normally occurs only between two people...It is a blessing to have this new group that has enabled spiritual sharing.” People took notice of and cherished the quality of depth exchanged with each other in the group. This may have led to the fruit of their experiencing a sense of growth and, as a result, the further increasing desire to grow in a community setting (coded as “experienced/desired growth in community”). The last theme related to the group dynamic is “God in community”- seeing God through the people in the group. It is worth mentioning that six out of the nine concluding remarks (from the reflection period at the end of each session) stated seeing God through their group members as particularly significant.

Improvement in relationships with people outside of the group, preceded by personal transformation, is coded as, “consolidated relationship” and represents roughly one quarter of the shared content. One example comes from Peter who shared, “When my wife set up a romantic anniversary dinner, God helped me see how blessed I am by my wife and other people around me.” Another example comes from Mary who shared, “God allowed me to see my father’s love despite

his not knowing how to express it.” The members considered these changes in relationships as the work of God.

The five themes presented above demonstrate the participants’ changing dynamics with people, both inside and outside the group, shaped by their experiences during group spiritual direction. These themes give us a better understanding of the results from the post-intervention interviews because they represent the changes that occurred during the intervention and the changes that resulted from it.

The last category of content shared during all the group sessions is “spiritual practices.” Among the four of them, it only has 19 entries and contains 5 % of the total shared content, as shown in Table 14 and Figure 15 below:

Table 14. Description of Themes for Spiritual Practices

| Themes | # Freq. N=19 | Descriptions |
|--|-----------------|---|
| Desired/Committed Greater Effort in Devotion | 13 | Participants expressed desire or committed greater effort towards nurturing their devotional life; they approached their relationship with God more as a pleasure rather than as an obligation. |
| Enjoyed Means | 4 | Participants enjoyed their time in silence to reflect and pray; they found it therapeutic. |
| Impactful Spiritual Exercise | 2 | Participants considered images for meditation and reflection as impactful tools in spiritual exercises. |



Figure 15. Themes for Spiritual Practices within 19 Entries

The small amount of entries on the subject of spiritual practice suggests that though the subject was not a focus on its own, it was, nevertheless, a fruit of encounters with God. This then led to the recorded result of participants desiring more, or committing more, effort in the area of devotional life. Another example of this was the observed impact of images (coded as “impactful spiritual exercise”). For instance, although the use of one particular image only generated two entries (when coding the theme of “spiritual exercise”), much data emerged from the many insightful and deep reflections from the centering exercise, *Come to Me*, as shown in Table 15 below:

Table 15. Number of Entries for Each Centering Exercise

| Centering Exercise | Tree and Child | Ps. 23 | Father' Love Letter | Daily Examen | Come to Me | Discernment Card |
|---------------------------|----------------|--------|---------------------|--------------|------------|------------------|
| Number of Entries | 63 | 52 | 54 | 48 | 91 | 74 |

Though small in proportion, the themes in the category of “spiritual practice” bore valuable results found in the post-intervention interviews. The theme, “enjoyed means,” was consistently expressed as joy for this new practice of silence—reflecting and discerning God’s prayer for people.

The data summarized above illustrate the findings based on the participants’ conversations disclosed during the six group sessions. They are represented in four categories among the participants’ experiences in “intimacy with God,” “inner life disclosure,” “relationships with people” - including members within the group and people outside the group - and their engagement in “spiritual practices.” Samuel Or, the participant observer, witnessed the participants’ growth and transformation throughout the group process during the three-month period. He said,

I witnessed the group members’ impressive progress in their spiritual lives during the short span of three months. Many pastors have been stuck and have run out of ideas on how to help those, who have been on their Christian journey for some time, to experience a deeper level of growth. We have tried various approaches, but not many programs have deemed to be effective. But through this short period of time, I have seen these brothers and sisters experience deepening levels of self-awareness, discernment of the movements and guidance of the Holy Spirit, and many other aspects. As a result, I believe that group spiritual direction would be very effective in facilitating spiritual growth, particularly for those who have been Christians for over 20 years.

Interpretation

The research discovered that the six members from both Hallelujah Chinese Evangelical Church and Toronto Simpson Chinese Alliance Church were initially not satisfied with their relationship with God. Although four of the six members regularly tried to do devotions, they did not experience God intimately through them; rather, they described their devotions as knowledge-driven, ineffective or as routine. After these six participants engaged in this study, the results showed that group spiritual direction had a positive impact on these participants' spiritual lives. Therefore, this research project purports that group spiritual direction should be considered an effective option in developing people's spiritual intimacy with God, with people, and their commitment to spiritual disciplines.

The positive outcomes of this project confirmed that the dynamics and dimensions of group spiritual direction are useful for enhancing a believer's relationship with God. The intentional community created by group spiritual direction helped believers experience God's presence through the presence of other believers, helping each other see and listen to God in places and circumstances that could have gone unnoticed on one's own. The participants experienced God's presence in the spiritual community, with words of encouragement, affirmation, and prayer rooted in prayerful listening—something deficient prior to the project. Group spiritual direction also provided guidance for a safe and contemplative environment, enabling the participants to experience

God more relationally. These experiences were grounded not on acquiring new intellectual knowledge *per se*, but on personal experiences of love, intimacy, and of the work of Holy Spirit, in quietude and listening. Most significantly, these experiences further motivated participants to spend even more time with God in devotions.

The findings showed that participants experienced a deepening in their relationship with God. There was a greater desire to spend time with God, to rest in Him, and to focus on God's guidance in their life circumstances. Their desires and motivations were largely attributed to their more profound experiences of God, including feeling His love, His presence, and hearing His words. Their inner transformation and the dynamics they experienced with other members were also factors that nurtured their new spiritual desires and love of God.

Regarding their relationship with others before the intervention, participants expressed both satisfaction and dissatisfaction. In general, participants acknowledged their struggles and experiences with disconnection in relationships. Some sensed that their interactions with people in church were open and harmonious; however, some perceived their relationships as shallow, self-centered, and mainly focused on ministry. After participating in this research study, the results showed that participants experienced deepened relationships with others. Their responses included people within the group as well as people outside the group. The participants were willing to share about their inner life struggles and pain. They became aware of their personal weaknesses, temptations,

and sins. They also shared about their desires for spiritual growth. Within the parameter of their inner life disclosures in group spiritual direction sessions, they shared about changes in relationships with other people. They asked and responded to reflective questions to explore the deeper lives of the group members as well as themselves. Within this dynamic, they sensed intimacy among members within the group, and they also expressed their desires to grow in such a community because of what they experienced. Regarding their relationships outside the group, the exercise of discernment (by discerning God's voice through interactions with other people) was extended to their interactions with other individuals outside the group. In addition, the spirit of opening one's inner life for spiritual conversation was becoming noticeable. The practice of spiritual conversation in the group spiritual direction session seemed to make spiritual dialogue and self-disclosure more natural in the participants' everyday relationships.

In regard to the daily spiritual practices for cultivating a personal and intimate spiritual walk with God, the results from the pre-intervention revealed that some members experienced comfort in their struggle through God's words and heard God in their circumstances at work; meanwhile, they also faced many challenges in their drawing close to God, including lack of method, desire, and commitment. Furthermore, some found their approach to seeking God too mechanical or too knowledge-driven. After participating in the study, findings showed participants had a greater commitment to doing devotions because of their

growing desire for God. They also enjoyed the various practices they were introduced to during the group sessions, such as practicing silence, the discerning of God's voice, gospel contemplation, and daily examen. In summary, there is a positive change for participants regarding their intimacy with God.

The following section attempts to interpret various factors contributing to the participants' various extent of positive experiences. These factors include learning new means of spiritual disciplines through centering exercises, a contemplative atmosphere of silence and discernment, the power of a spiritual community and, lastly, the passion and means as motivation for spiritual disciplines in the daily life.

This research project attempts to understand why the selected Chinese Christian evangelical communities have been experiencing barrenness and what the contributing factors might be. Ruth Barton, in her book, *Life Together in Christ*, states that churches tend to overpromise the transformation of the soul. She shares her own experience below:

There is another overpromised, under delivered aspect of the church today that is equally disillusioning, and that is the promise of spiritual transformation. One of the great mysteries of my growing-up years as a pastor's kid was watching the people in our church and noticing that some of them were just not changing...Then, as I became a grown-up in the church, I sometimes noticed the same thing about myself! Even though I participated fully in the life of the community and served there faithfully...I was not being transformed in the deepest level of my being. (Barton 2014, 10-11)

In my eighteen years of pastoral ministry, Barton's testimony has been common to many people I encounter and minister to. Simply knowing more

information about God, being involved in community, or doing more for God may not promise transformation. David Benner in his book, *The Gift of Being Yourself*, argues that, “Christian spirituality involves a transformation of the self that occurs only when God and self are both deeply known... Leaving the self out of Christian spirituality results in spirituality that is not well grounded in experience. It is, thus, not well grounded in reality. Focusing on God while failing to know ourselves deeply may produce an external form of piety” (Benner 2015, 22). Benner emphasizes that real transformation—a process in recovering and living the true self—can occur only when a deep knowledge of God and self are both grounded in experience. Therefore, a spiritual community grounded in their orientation of God and a self-reflective life is crucial in order for us to experience authentic transformation. However, this necessary community seems rare in the church these days. Dougherty states, “Unfortunately today, because there is so much isolation and loneliness, people often get confused about what they are looking for [in community]. They are unable to discriminate between the companionship of interested people and the community of people who can help them seek God” (Dougherty 1995, 13). Church can easily substitute ministry sharing for inner life spiritual sharing (where God’s activity is experienced in one’s life). Debra lamented in both the interviews and group sessions: “At church, people share mostly about ministry; there is very little spiritual sharing. Even as leaders, we lack spiritual bonding, our interactions are always ministry-focused.” Esther said, “There is a general lack of depth in our relationships with people at

church.” Dougherty writes that in the face of this phenomenon of lack of community, people begin to look for the “support of a personal, visible community to assist them which [is] not always available within the institutional church” (Dougherty 1995, 9).

The research findings showed that group spiritual direction succeeded in creating opportunities for the participants to experience and bond through “the blessing of reciprocity” (Dougherty 1995, 7), by practicing spiritual exercises in community. This research project claims, moreover, that these soulful connections were particularly enhanced by the spiritual practices introduced during these intervention sessions. The practices of contemplative silence and discernment allowed participants to practice safe inner life disclosure about the innermost parts of their souls and their relationships with God, and to simultaneously experience deeply nourishing soulful relationships with one another. Lastly, the findings of this research purport that vivid experience of God in the spiritual community, provided by group spiritual direction (for example, enjoying spiritual exercises, reaping benefits from spiritual exercises, experiencing God more intimately, and engaging meaningfully with self and others) plays a valuable part in renewing and deepening a Christian’s love for God. We will look at four major factors below that have contributed to the positive change among the participants.

Centering Exercises that Enable Reflections on Personal Experiences of God

“Centering exercises”—unfamiliar to the participants—were done at the beginning of every group session. This dynamic spiritual exercise and devotional method engaged members with God in new ways. The six exercises (as shown in Appendix D) were intentionally chosen to facilitate their experiences of God (Kataphatic Heart) through images, Scripture, “The Father’s Love Letter”, religious painting and physical participation. Opportunities to experience God were also cultivated by creating a contemplative atmosphere in group spiritual direction, which allowed for the silence and discernment necessary for the mentioned spiritual exercises.

The exercises began by inviting participants to become more self-aware by reflecting on “where” they, and others, might be on the journey of faith. The second and third exercises allowed them to sense God’s love through more personal expressions of love, accompanied by the contemplative music of Ruth Fazal: *Love Songs from the River*.

During the reflection sessions toward the end, participants commented on their new experiences while reflecting on the image, *Come to Me*: “I saw God in the midst of us and He *spoke* to me. He also *spoke* to me through companionship (italics mine),” “I *felt* very intimate with Jesus, He is so humble,” and “I *experienced* a renewal of mind and transformation among us (italics mine).” During the exercise of “Daily Examine”, they had the chance to review their day and take note of God’s presence, moments of consolation (pleasantness and joy)

and moments of desolation (unpleasantness or distress). One participant reviewed her inner journey in these words: “I am *full of joy* in *seeing* God’s work and teachings...I saw a flower budding from a trimmed dying plant, and I *felt joy*. It was like God was *telling me* that He is trimming all of the weaknesses that hinder my growth (italics mine).” When she was asked what part of her needed to be trimmed, the participant answered, “My pride and perfectionistic character. God wants me to see people’s positive attributes while remembering I am imprudent, impatient and impulsive. I am happy for God’s teaching and I want to be trimmed.” Whenever a person heard what God spoke to him/her, he/she was able to have a deeper knowledge of himself/herself or be able to see the weaknesses of “false self” (as in Benner’s language), a form of fig-leaf to protect and defend for ourselves (Benner 2015, 76). The spiritual exercises of the heart helped them to move from abstract knowledge of God to actual experience of God. Alice Fryling explains, in *Seeking God Together*, the significance of “the place of the heart” in group spiritual direction: “In the Bible, the word ‘heart’ actually means the intellect, memory, emotions, desire and will. To talk about ‘moving from the head down to the heart’ does not mean to move from thinking to feeling. It means to move from theoretical knowledge to actual experience” (Fryling 2009, 56-57). The dynamics of the centering exercises enhanced the participants’ actual experiences of God.

Different methods of devotional practices during the weekend retreat and centering exercise sessions provided a variety of ways to listen for God. Some of

the enriching practices used were *lectio divina*, Ignatian's "Daily Examine", "gospel contemplation", art images with Scripture and contemplative music. These practices introduced participants to devotional practices that engaged all their senses: observing art, listening to music, reflecting upon God's work, discerning God's presence, feeling emotions, or entering the gospel story in the first person through one's imagination, whether through the use of scriptural or visual *lectio divina*. These particular elements were specifically chosen to address, and counteract, the pre-intervention interview descriptions of their devotional lives as "information-based," "lacking impact," "insensitive to God's voice," "mechanical or no regular devotions." They were especially chosen to also address the similar descriptions given in regard to their spiritual practices: "lack of desire" and "no impact on prayer or desiring God but lacking methods." The new spiritual exercises provided different dynamics and experiences of God, resulting in a more personal and experiential relationship with God.

A Contemplative Atmosphere: Opening up to the Work of the Holy Spirit in Silence and Discernment

The practice of silence and discernment is associated with the participants' deepening intimacy with God. This practice included adopting new disciplines during their quiet time as well as in their relating to other people. The spiritual discipline of silence creates sacred space, drawing individuals to discern God's voice and movement in the absence of noise. It removes external distractions,

allowing for the opportunity to become aware of the condition of one's soul in the presence of the Holy Spirit. It prepares the soul to become open and sensitive to the stirring work of the Holy Spirit. The research findings showed that the abundant use of silence led to one of the most powerful experiences of the group spiritual direction sessions. Four sessions of silence were built into each group session.

The first silence followed a "centering exercise," inviting participants to reflect upon and listen for God's message. One example was from Mary, who after listening to Psalm 23, shared, "I am very touched by the first two verses of the psalm. After going to the retreat, I became aware of the distance between God and me. In the past, I only sought God when I had issues, and I lacked desire for Him. My devotional life was unstable, and I really wanted to break through this...I didn't want to just 'get through the homework.' I wanted to value it and see time spent with God as a significant part of my life."

The second exercise of silence took place while one person shared. While one person spoke, all other members practiced silence while prayerfully listening to the speaker and to God on behalf of the speaker. The third silence took place after someone's sharing, giving participants the opportunity to practice discernment on behalf of the one who had shared, providing space for communal discernment. It was another opportunity to become in tune with God and discern God's movement in that person's life. The fourth silence took place after companioning with an individual. Each person listened for prayers that God

desired to be prayed for the person. As Anne Grizzle explained, “During the sharing, other members of the group are prayerfully listening to the person and to God on behalf of the person” (Grizzle 2007); and when the sharing is complete, all members return to silence and ask, ‘God, what are you speaking to this person through what is shared, and what is your heart for her/him?’ One would be ‘slowly savouring the taste of divine flavouring for whatever is on the plate’ (Grizzle 2007, 45). Dougherty said, “Prayerful silence nurtures discernment in group spiritual direction...discernment happens primarily through our willingness to invite another into our discernment and our attempts to articulate the God-noticing in our lives” (Dougherty 1995, 35). This willingness of inviting another person into our lives, through the process of discernment in silence, stimulated, even initiated, spiritual intimacy between the members. This element of community discernment could be one of the reasons why participants felt close (coded “group intimacy”) and why they sensed God speak to them through people, (coded “God in community”). It could be that this experience facilitated their desire to grow in community, (coded “experienced/ desire growth in community”). Mary’s sharing further illustrated this: “This group spiritual direction helps me examine myself regardless of whether it being good or bad. The homework is helping me to see myself.” “This method (silence) is a breakthrough for me; the space created for silence has helped me to be more focused when it comes to sharing,” said Peter. During his post-intervention interview, James said, “The biggest lesson I learned was through silence. In

silence, I experienced how God teaches me to speak, and now, I sense this is the right path to proceed in listening to God’s voice.”

The four-fold sections of silence built in template of group spiritual direction required one to be in silence and discern. It could be summarized in the following figure:

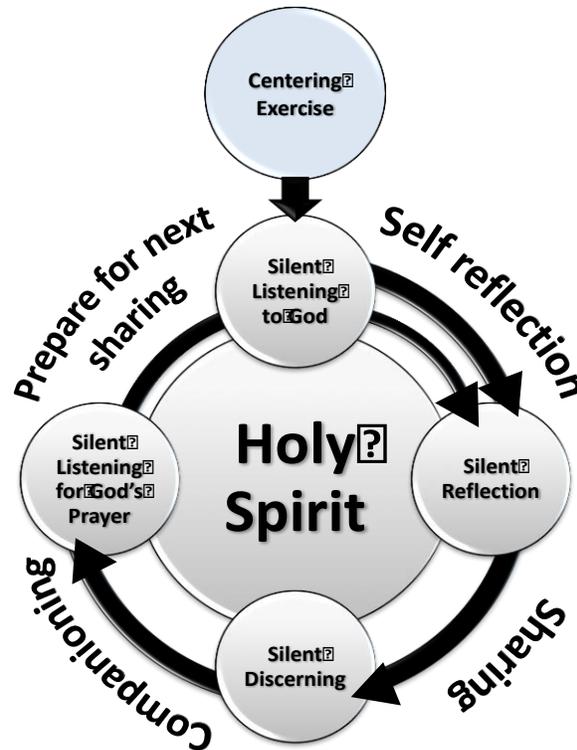


Figure 16. Dynamics of Silence and Discernment Practiced in Group Spiritual Direction

The multitude of sacred spaces gave these individuals the rare opportunity to focus on and listen for the “channel of God” that we seldom practice due to the consuming demands of our busy lives. It is a divine moment when participants are silently discerning God’s voice for themselves and for one another. This practice allows for the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit to take place, during which

participants become more attentive to noticing God’s activity in their lives. The intentional act of being silent is similar to the intentional gazing for the mercy of the Lord—those who are hopeful and expectantly seek after God are open to him (Psalm 123:2). This echoes what Grizzle said, “The very process of learning to listen to God on behalf of others also trains participants in a most crucial spiritual task: listening to God in the midst of life... turning [us] from tourist[s] to pilgrim[s]” (Grizzle 2007, 45).

This contemplative atmosphere compensates for the over-developed cognitive spirituality typically found in the selected Chinese evangelical churches of the G.T.A., where engaging God is primarily achieved through didactic lessons. The research program of group spiritual direction provided the participants a contemplative environment to experience God through a first-hand heart experience. It was an experience of contemplative spirituality, pursuing listening to and noticing God in prayerful silence, and learning to discern the voice of God, in order to cultivate personal intimacy with God, and with others.

The Power of a Spiritual Community: A Safe Environment for Inner Life Disclosure

The findings indicated in this research project support the claim that group spiritual direction proved helpful to the six participants in deepening their spiritual intimacy with believers inside the group, and improving relationships with people outside the group. The abundance of intimate and vulnerable inner life disclosure showed that participants found group spiritual direction to provide

a safe environment for them to disclose their inner life stories. The findings revealed that the participants were already aware of the unhealthy patterns in their ministry, personality, family relationships, temptations and sins they needed to attend to. It was extraordinary to see them reach such depths of vulnerability and connectedness when disclosing their struggles of personal and relational weakness, for it is not common for Chinese people, or Chinese Christians even, to reveal their inner struggles. Instead, it is more common to hear people describe their interactions as disconnected, shallow, or preoccupied with ministry work. Thus, it was precious to witness participants perceiving group spiritual direction as a safe place to reveal their personal struggles (which involved overcoming the “mianze” those Chinese individuals are often concerned about). Dougherty’s description of the essence of spiritual community is the “intimate bond of sharing that is established in a shared reality” (Dougherty 2007, 8). We observed the participants’ joy for such a community in these following quotes during the post-intervention interviews. Debra shared, “In group spiritual direction, I truly saw my brothers’ and sisters’ support; it was authentic relationship. [We] did not mask or try to hide something. We lack this kind of environment for sharing in the church.”

Esther shared her shocking experience in witnessing transformation which occurred in the group. She felt that in ordinary life, she did not usually hear people share their real struggles. No one seemed able to enter one another’s soul deeply. She said, “But here [in group spiritual direction], I was shocked...I

witnessed the transforming of lives as people experienced God. Sometimes, I saw the person's weaknesses, but because of God's love, they became full of hope. I rejoiced to see their growth." Esther also felt there was a wall between God and her before group spiritual direction, but now, she felt as though it had been broken down and felt very intimate with God and sensed His help. Esther shared also how her experience with people in the group had changed her dynamics with other people in her life, "Now, I am able to share with my son, speaking from my heart and about the world. I can share the deepest part of my heart with my pastor. God gives me insight through our dialogue as I seek to understand my family members better." She felt that this deepening dialogue helped her gain more understanding of her son and her husband. She exclaimed, "I wonder why more Christians do not do this. There is something missing, we are lacking something in our Christian life." Mary also described her delightful experience in learning and growing through community. She found that her understanding and experience of the Bible were enriched and deepened by the many responses she received from companionship and the encouragement of others. She stated, "When I read the Bible as an individual, I am delighted, but it is short-lived. However, when I read together as a group, I am able to absorb more because there are so many responses through companionship. Before, it was just a Bible story; now, I enter the story to experience it personally."

The three participants attributed their transforming and growing experiences to the communal aspect of spiritual community. This unique format

of group spiritual direction keeps people from trying to fix one other's problem.

As Debra shared,

The environment of group spiritual direction allowed for deep sharing; it was very free. Through prayer and companioning, I was able to sense their support while learning about their struggles, and we were able to understand each other, offer prayer, give encouragement and comfort, etc. This gave us the sense of intimacy... I was able to see into their lives and understand them because the environment enabled sharing.

The environment of group spiritual direction encouraged them to simply be present, to walk and discern with one another, in the presence of the Lord—just like that of the Emmaus road model.

Another key to this spiritual community is the power of deep listening or a form of “holy” listening that aims to discern the movement of God in our everyday life. William Veinot, in his Doctor of Ministry thesis, *Paying Attention to God: A Small Group Project in Spiritual Direction*, cited Mary Rose O'Reilly, a spiritual director and Quaker, about her observation in the power of listening:

Attention. Deep listening. People are dying in spirit for lack of it. In academic culture, where I range, most listening is critical listening... In society at large, people often listen with agenda, to sell or petition or seduce. Seldom is there a deep, open hearted, unjudging reception of the other... By contrast, if someone truly listen to me, my spirit begins to expand. (O' Reilly in Veinot 2003, 55)

The group was aware that group spiritual direction was not a platform to fix and solve other people's problem, but that it was a platform for us to learn to exercise holy listening. Holy listening does not rest solely on fact or information. Holy listening is not about being able to paraphrase or empathize, as it is in the fields of psychological or pastoral counselling (even though we do need those

skills). Instead, it is listening prayerfully to the others in the group session setting. Lynne Baab cites congregational consultant and seminary professor Craig Satterlee's work, *Holy Listening*, to explain holy listening: it is how we seek to discern "the presence and activity of God in the joys, struggles, and hopes of the ordinary activities of congregational life, as well as the uncertainty and opportunity of change and transition" (Satterlee in Baab 2014, 9). I believe that this form of listening taught to the group provided the kind of "safe" environment that the participants were describing in their experience. For example, Esther shared, "I felt a freedom to share with others at whatever capacity I felt comfortable with." Participants were able to speak freely and honestly about the true state of their soul's journey and offer spiritual care through prayer and companionship. Participants were able to taste the authentic spiritual community as they were led through the practice of giving themselves to God and to others in accountability. At the same time, the community itself facilitated the reciprocity of mutual confession, support and prayer, which in turn made the group a place for people to feel connected to God, and to experience nourishment for their soul.

Experiencing God through New Means for Spiritual Disciplines: A Growing Desire for God

Most of the participants began with the desire to cultivate intimacy with God. However, the data collected revealed two common obstacles: a lack of motivation due to spiritual exercises that did not seem to facilitate transformation and a perception that the methods were dull and would not result in spiritual

vitality. One encouraging observation of this research project was to have witnessed four participants' growth in desiring God and commitment to seeking God more. The other two experienced improvement in quality in their time with God but did not make further changes in terms of commitment or quantity of time. The results found in the data supported the claim that group spiritual direction positively impacted the six participants' devotional lives. Participants were able to cultivate greater desire for and greater commitment to spiritual disciplines because of their experiences of God, facilitated by group spiritual direction and the new spiritual disciplines learned (see Table 9A, 9B, 9C and 9D).

Tables 5A, 5B, 5C and 5D show that five of the six participants credited their greater motivation for practicing daily spiritual practices to experiencing God during the group sessions (coded "experience-motivated devotion"). They experienced God's presence in their relationships with people, coded as "God is in people." Participants were so moved by these experiences of encountering God, whether encountering Him personally or through group members' shared experiences and transformation. These encounters greatly contributed to their growing desires for God, resulting in greater commitment during the research period. Debra's stories illustrate the power of experiencing God:

Through sharing time, I was able to witness God's work in group members' lives and experience God as real. This motivated me to be close to God. When I experienced God speaking to me, shining on me, I came to look so forward to quiet time. I was able to see my own darkness and limitation; and yet, He did not reveal only this to me but that He accepted me. This experience was so real and very impactful. I had never encountered God like this on my Christian journey before, and such

experiences made me want to experience Him more frequently, continuously.

Mary also shared about her witnessing the power of the Holy Spirit: “The Holy Spirit was in the midst of the group. Before, it was only knowing *about* the Holy Spirit; but, now I *experienced* the work of God through the Holy Spirit (italics mine). He touched me, to the point of tears, during my companioning.” Mary shared also about her newfound joy in engaging the Scripture through trying different roles in gospel contemplation exercises.

The data supports the claim that experience is a critical motivator for spending time in spiritual disciplines. This is reflected in the category “experiencing God,” with themes of experiencing God through different dynamics. It includes five counts in the code “experience-motivated devotion,” and two counts in “new friendship with God.” The other experiences include “the love of God,” “the work of Holy Spirit,” and “the assurance of God” (see Tables 5A to 5D).

Another factor that contributed to participants’ overall growth in practicing spiritual disciplines was the teaching and practicing of new spiritual practices, such as “centering exercises” during the weekend retreat. The post-intervention interview results, regarding the participants’ relationship with God, one of the four categories, “new spiritual practices”—and its three themes (“use silence in devotion,” “discernment,” and “centering exercise”) showed that the participants adopted these new spiritual practices into their daily devotional lives. For instance, Peter recalled, “I used to give feedback and rational responses to

people; now, I use silence and discernment to relate to people... It is very powerful.” Debra said, “In ministry meetings, instead of praying at the beginning and at the end, we tried waiting for a week to discern God’s guidance together. James stated, “Silence has deepened my relationship with God...I began to use silence in my spiritual practice, as a means of encountering God.” Similarly, data from the post-intervention interviews (see Table 7B) revealed that half of the participants adopted new practices of silence and discernment as a way to relate to other people.

The new approaches to spiritual disciplines remedied the pre-intervention problem of “desiring God but lacking method.” The most relevant and encouraging data found during the post-intervention interview was discovering how much the participants had to say when describing the impact of their spiritual disciplines. This was so important that one of the four emerging categories was named “newly-adopted spiritual practices.” In this category, there were three counts in the code “journaling,” three counts labeled under “silence, solitude, and meditation,” two counts under “daily examine,” and one count in “waiting, and listening prayer.” Mary shared her experiences of deepening her spiritual intimacy with God through the practices of “daily examen”, “gospel contemplation”, as well as “journaling” in the post-intervention interview:

I practice “daily examen” by evaluating my consolation and desolation experiences of the day and feel God’s presence... In my devotions, I try to play different roles through gospel contemplation; for example, feet washing. I am learning to picture Him and feel Him. For example, in the story of washing feet, I welcome him and there is a sense of intimacy. I

have learned to visualize an image of the passage, and reflect on it first. My imagination and scope of meditation and reflection have widened.

Mary also adjusted her priorities regarding spiritual disciplines. She shared that housework used to be her first priority, then it was to read the Bible or a book. She described, “I was lazy and indifferent towards God. I could not feel God; I felt very distant from God and felt like an observer. Now, our relationship is engaging and deepening... Now, I feel close to God.” In addition, Mary joyfully described her new exercise of journaling her experiences of encountering God. She said,

I have also begun journaling now. I wish to feel more deeply in my relationship with Christ. This is like having different fuel in a battery. Before, nothing more came out of listening to speakers at traditional church summer conferences. However, after group spiritual direction, it all became so vivid and substantial.

Mary’s testimony helped to illustrate that the power of encountering God, aided by skills in spiritual practices, can create new desire and thirst for God. In addition, it can further grow into an enriching spiritual life, not limited to the designated slots of daily devotions, but rather, as a moment-by-moment journey with Jesus Christ, Himself. In sum, the dynamic of the experiential components of the centering exercises, the contemplative structure of group spiritual direction, a discerning and companioning nature of the group and the new means of spiritual practices all contributed to the effective and positive experiences in group spiritual direction.

Small Group Theory and Group Spiritual Direction

In small group dynamics, group cohesion and group climate are two significant components in measuring group health. Group cohesion can be defined “as a bond that pulls people toward membership in a particular group” (Kinder 2015). When a group is cohesive, they bond together. Group cohesion generally has two characteristics: task cohesion and social cohesion.

Task cohesion refers to the commitment of participants to the purpose and activities of the group (Hargie 2011, 235-246). There was a strong sense of task cohesion when the members were invited to experience group spiritual direction to accomplish a particular task. Also, they had a clear and shared goal when they were informed of the purpose of the group spiritual direction, which was to improve three areas in their spiritual life: deepening their spiritual intimacy with God, bonding with fellow believers, and strengthening their commitment to practicing the spiritual disciplines.

Social cohesion refers to the positive chemistry and group satisfaction among group members (Hargie 2011, 445). In the group spiritual direction project, members were aware that it was not a place where they needed to “fix” one another, nor to offer solutions to problems, but to simply be spiritual companions, discerning God’s work in one another’s lives. Thus, in this non-judgmental environment, members showed a strong sense of openness and willingness to be vulnerable because they felt the group was a safe place to disclose their inner life journeys. As a result, there was a strong sense of social

cohesion. Members seemed to enjoy one another and paid great respect to one another as they shared about how God spoke to them through the other members.

Social cohesion was also exhibited through the members' strong commitment to attendance, satisfaction with one another, and willingness to offer encouragement and support. A good level of group cohesion also contributes to a healthy group climate.

The second factor of group cohesion is group climate. Group climate refers to the quality of the group experience among the group members (Marston & Samovar, 1988). A positive climate includes the quality of group participation, affirming dialogue and interactions among members, equal input from all members, a clear understanding of member roles, and a strong sense of the goal and purpose of the meetings.

In group spiritual direction, each person takes turn sharing. After the sharing, every member participates in silence and discernment, silently preparing himself or herself to offer companionship to the member who has shared. The nature and structure of group spiritual direction enables every participant to share. Furthermore, participants clearly understand their roles as companions who are to offer insight to the others after contemplatively waiting on the Lord. Participants then offer insight inspired from spiritual listening and they also pray for the other participants. Motivation, fostered by the members' sense of connection with one another and a shared goal, was noticeable when members expressed their enthusiasm about their group experience. In sum, group members' vulnerability

and openness, the affirming companionship, the equal input from each participant, and their sense of goal and purpose of the group participation contributed to a healthy group climate.

The above dynamics, a result of members learning about small group concepts regarding group cohesion and group climate, seems to help explain the factors that contributed to the positive experience of this group spiritual direction research project.

Outcomes

The positive outcomes of this project were as anticipated. They confirmed that a believer's relationship with God, with people, and commitment to their spiritual practices could be enhanced by group spiritual direction and its unique dynamics and dimensions. The dynamics (created by centering exercises, silent space, the spirit of companionship) within group spiritual direction helped the participants to experience God on a more personal and intimate level. This dynamic allowed them to experience God's presence and to become more aware of God in circumstances, in creation, in everyday life and in intentional moments of silence. Group spiritual direction also enabled these believers to experience God on a more personal level, grounded not on intellectual knowledge alone, but on personal experiences of love, assurance, and intimacy, and of the work of Holy Spirit. Most significantly, these experiences were highly motivating for cultivating deeper intimacy with God.

Participants' improved relationships with other believers was also as expected. Their multi-faceted descriptions illustrated their deep experiences of intimacy, mostly with the believers in the group, and some with people outside the group. The outcomes indicated that the safety built into the group spiritual direction community encouraged believers to address their relational dynamics with God, with themselves (their own struggles, patterns of ministry, temptations/sins and weaknesses), and with others. The group format fostered trust and intimacy as members explored one another's deeper life stories while companioning. The unique component of companioning in group spiritual direction nurtured this dynamic by restricting attempts at fixing one another's problems or offering solutions. Rather, companioning encouraged the attitude and pursuit of journeying with one another, as companions, through silent group discerning and listening to God, helping each other to see God among them. However, though there were some examples of the participants positively affecting their marriages, parental relationships and work relationships, group spiritual direction did not translate into significant transformation of people's spiritual intimacy with other believers outside the group with people who lacked the same training. Without training and understanding for companioning, for example, the lack of mutual listening and mutual refraining from "fixing" each other's problems is understandable. One group member attempted to use these methods of sharing at her children's ministry meeting and another member tried to use it in her Bible study group, but neither of them found the same encouraging

results. Perhaps these secondary groups needed a demonstration of the “companioning” dynamic, some more guidance on how to be a “companion,” or even a basic explanation and rationale for it. Perhaps it implies that the dynamics of the contemplative environment of group spiritual direction—an environment of silence, deep listening and discernment—is not easily adapted into other contexts where, for example, ministry issues are the primary focus. Such differences of orientation, within different contexts, could make group spiritual direction difficult to transfer. There is hope that if an entire church community were exposed to the shared experiences found in group spiritual direction, over a period of time, the fruits of deep listening and discerning would become common spiritual practices through the discipline of “companioning.”

The last predicted outcome revealed there would be increased desire for spending time with God, and a prioritizing of commitment to spiritual practices. This was true for most of the participants. Those individuals who, during the pre-intervention interview, expressed their irregular devotional life, or seeking after God only during hardship, experienced growth in multiple ways. For those whose habits were already more formed, their satisfaction with God grew by approaching God through the more contemplative approaches of silence, meditation, listening prayer and discernment. Some of these practices were not entirely new to the participants; nevertheless, they only knew *of* them cognitively and seldom applied in their daily lives. The different spiritual disciplines, taught and practiced during the weekend retreat and the “centering exercise” sessions,

proved to be helpful within these specific contexts, as shown in the various outcomes.

Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this research was to study the impact of group spiritual direction for Chinese evangelical Christians. It involved six participants from two different Chinese evangelical churches. In my past years of pastoral experience, Chinese evangelical churches that focused too much on Christian education programs, service and mission. The approach to discipleship tended to lack guiding and coaching believers to cultivate close relationships with God and believers. A spiritual model in Chapter 3 is used to address the issue. There are four types of spirituality in the model mentioned, that I have coined as: (1) Cognitive Spirituality, (2) Experiential Spirituality, (3) Contemplative Spirituality, and (4) Societal Regeneration Spirituality. From both my personal experiences as a pastor, and the results revealed from interviewing four pastors and the academic presentation, “Reflections of Historical Spirituality and Theology”, of Dr. Milton Wan on Chinese Spiritual Tradition, I was able to confirm the tendency of the selected Chinese evangelical churches, in the G.T.A., to strongly emphasize cognitive spirituality, focusing primarily on Christian education through programs, events and stewardship; and outreaching through a “societal regeneration spirituality” through conservative expressions of services, evangelism and mission. This research, then, attempted to use group spiritual

direction—an intentionally formed spiritual community—as a means to cultivate a more holistic and experiential Christian spirituality. By focusing on the components of “experiential spirituality” and “contemplative spirituality,” we can address the imbalance caused by the strong emphases on head knowledge, service and action. The goal was to nourish weakened relationships with God and other believers, and to strengthen commitment to practicing spiritual disciplines in daily life. The research results were helpful to me for my ministry, “Holistic Sanctuary,” as well as Chinese evangelical churches seeking new approaches to building authentic spiritual community and enhancing believers’ spiritual intimacy with God.

Questions and Concerns Raised by the Research Project

Based on the pre-post intervention interviews, data revealed that the participants experienced encouraging improvement in all three areas: deepening a spiritual intimacy with God, with fellow believers and strengthening a stronger commitment in the engagement of spiritual disciplines. When the participants were presented with the results, most people found themselves properly reflected in the data presented.

The results also helped me recognize a void about my fourteen years of pastoral ministry in the local churches. I realized that I had never officially pursued and probed to know my congregants’ relationship with God and with people. I realized I did not ask about which spiritual practices they adopted. When

asked how their walk with God was, the answers were vague and uninformative: “It is okay,” “So-so,” or “Not too good.” We did not designate a space or platform from which to look deeply into our members’ spiritual lives. Therefore, in this research project, I was surprised to find that although most (four out of six) regularly spent time with God, they were not satisfied in their spiritual lives. Furthermore, although they experienced God’s help during times of struggle, they were unable to quench their thirst for a consistently genuine and intimate walk with God and with one another. The research platform endowed me with the opportunity to take a closer look at the plight of the Chinese evangelical church, and to listen carefully to the cries of their souls. It became my passion and call to share these encouraging findings with pastors and shepherds seeking spiritual transformation for their parishioners, since a great dissatisfaction was in the church itself.

With regards to the participants’ feedback during the post-intervention interviews, one participant expressed that he preferred to delay making any conclusions. Although John found his entire group experience refreshing, including becoming more aware of God’s presence, and the valuable bonding of the community despite that he thought that he was a detached and independent person, he preferred to measure the longevity of the impact he experienced for a longer duration. It would be greatly beneficial if future researchers could study the impact of group spiritual direction for a longer duration.

A research participant raised concern over the restricted nature of discussion during group spiritual direction, concerned about the compartmentalization of a person by focusing only on the spiritual life. This participant was concerned about the lack of knowing a person more holistically (such as what this person was like at work, at home, and/or in ministry). Furthermore, due to the restricted nature of the conversations during group spiritual direction, follow-up on that which was previously shared was lacking. The participant was right to notice the strict guidance of conversation in the design of group spiritual direction. The contrast can be an adjustment for those who are acclimated to the free dialogue normally encouraged during traditional small groups or fellowship meetings. It is partially for this reason that such stringent guidance was placed on dialogue: so that soulful conversations could be nurtured. Nevertheless, if this research were to be repeated again, it could be helpful to highlight this restrictions in group spiritual direction. I suggest infrequent informal gatherings (should the group members agree) alongside group spiritual direction, in order to allow for freer conversation and to add depth and variation of sharing to the group spiritual direction experience.

One question raised by the research participants was if they could start their own group and practice their own group spiritual direction sessions. This question addressed the issue of professional vs. laity, and whether group spiritual direction should be led by spiritual directors or by members of the group. The answer given was that it would be possible to practice their own sessions, and that

group members could rotate the role of facilitator. Dougherty suggests that if the group has a facilitator, it should be “someone who honors the process and engages others quickly” (Dougherty 1995, 65). At this stage, I suggested, that if the group were to continue meeting for group spiritual direction, to first consider having only two people share instead of six. This would allow more time for each participant to share. Furthermore, the session could be followed by an enrichment session or a brief coaching session guided by an experienced spiritual director. This could help to deepen the experience more, as well as provide opportunities to address any questions or concerns raised during a session.

Another reason for the members’ positive experiences with group spiritual direction was their expressed interest in the area of spiritual formation when they had been selected from the spiritual formation class. An individual’s eagerness to grow spiritually prior to attending group spiritual direction is important.

Though the results reflected many different positive experiences, not all of them were. There are some skepticism regarding (at least some of) the results were to be expected. As the researcher, I also had to consider the possibility that participants might give positive responses because they did not want to “ruin [my] research project,” (as shared by a participant who did not want to harm my research, though he was doubtful of the short three-month based impact of his group spiritual direction experiences). I also considered the possibility that the participants may have felt pressure to give me face by sharing more positive experiences. Furthermore, the positive experiences varied; some categories only

had one or two counts. Some participants may have increased their commitment to their spiritual practices, but, to varying degrees; and, not all the results were overwhelming or unanimous.

Despite some concerns, most participants found the other outcomes encouraging. They also found the findings representative of their overall group spiritual direction experience when they were presented to them. The outcomes of this research project were very helpful in supporting and illustrating the spiritual model chosen for this study. It also provided the support and rationale for teaching and leading spiritual direction and group spiritual direction, borne in response to the need for such spiritual development, in the face of the over-emphasis on “cognitive spirituality,” as is common in, but not limited to, Chinese evangelical churches. My ministry (Holistic Sanctuary) was designed to provide believers a place to experience deeper communion with God, through the use of different transformational spiritual disciplines during retreats, spiritual direction or group spiritual direction, apart from the approaches traditionally used by Chinese evangelical churches: sermon, Bible study and devotions. Although the benefits of group spiritual direction and the different spiritual disciplines varied amongst the participants, each person was, in some way, renewed by their experiences of encountering God through these experiences. This was evidenced when most of the participants continued to participate in the following three courses of post program in group spiritual direction where a fee was applied. Recently (after a year after the completion of this research project), the

participants from one of these two churches were able to host their own group spiritual direction sessions at church.

Through the practices of inner and soulful conversations, grounded on discernment and listening prayer, members not only nourished their relationships with God, in the context of human relationship, but also their relationships with one another. This was extremely significant since, currently, Chinese evangelical Christians are often describing their relationships with one another in church as shallow or ministry-based, (such as the example given of one deacon's lament about overhearing a member describing their church community as a group of "familiar strangers for twenty years", or, when those who attended my training course shared that small group discussions usually revolved around the latest trip or health food ideas).

Samuel Or, the participant observer, found the participants' growth and transformation through short period of time remarkable, and was convinced that group spiritual direction is truly life-giving to both relationships with God and with people. Nevertheless, he highlighted the need to address some misconceptions popular to Chinese Christians, such as the belief that those who are committed to ministry are fervent servants already. Otherwise, he said, many might not sense a need for group spiritual direction and fail to experience its rich benefits. A preliminary suggestion was to possibly get church leaders and pastors to see the long-term benefits, and then to participate in group spiritual direction, and then be trained to become a facilitator (if found to be gifted in this area).

Another suggestion was perhaps a group demonstration might be an effective first step for introducing group spiritual direction to selected groups in the church, or perhaps during a retreat.

In addition to the expected improvements in relationship with God and with people, the last anticipated outcome was an increased commitment to spiritual disciplines. Part of the teaching or practices of different spiritual discipline methods were done during the weekend retreat and the “centering exercise” session. One of the ministries of *Holistic Sanctuary* is to conduct non-traditional (at least to Chinese evangelicals), contemplative retreats that focus on spending time in silence, solitude, meditation and other spiritual disciplines. Instead of teaching different spiritual exercises didactically, they are taught, but also practiced together. This outcome of the research helped *Holistic Sanctuary* demonstrate the impact of, and advocate for, weekend retreats and group spiritual direction as helpful support to increasing the daily commitment of spiritual practices for Chinese evangelical Christians.

In spite of the varying degrees of success, group spiritual direction, due to its benefits and specific appropriateness to Chinese evangelical churches, has been demonstrated to be an important and viable option for nurturing Chinese evangelical Christians in their faith. The hope, therefore, is that group spiritual direction would then be utilized to provide the space and dynamics for growing contemplative spirituality, that is rooted in biblical knowledge, in order to

experience authentic fellowship—with God and with people—that is critical to Christian faith.

CHAPTER 5:

CONCLUSION

As a Christian and pastor, my deepest desire is to grow in the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ and to help others experience the abundant riches of the Christian life which can come with spiritual formation. Sadly, conversations with various pastoral acquaintances in Chinese evangelical circles, observations from well-known leaders and authors, and my own experiences (recounted in my spiritual autobiography in Chapter 2) make it evident that many Christians, including pastors and church leaders, remained untransformed at the deepest part of our being. Peter Scazzero describes the situation by explaining that many Christians focus on transforming only a small percentage of their lives: “10 percent [represents] the visible change we make that others can see. We are nicer people, more respectful... [We] clean up our lives somewhat—from alcohol and drugs to foul language to illicit behavior and beyond. We begin to pray and share Christ with others...” (Scazzero 2006, 15). At the same time, Scazzero says that we remain unchanged at the deepest level of our being.

The reason for this is that most people are not seeking to build a right relationship with God and to bear fruit in their daily life. Edmund Chan, a keynote speaker for the forthcoming Chinese Coordination Centre for Evangelism

conference in 2020, states that the church will be in a crisis if traditional approaches to discipleship are not re-evaluated and reformed. In his article “Seven Paradigm Shifts in Twenty-First Century Discipling,” he describes the disconcerting situation:

The church is losing ground. Sure, in some quarters, she is gaining ground. But in radical discipleship and in spiritual depth, she is losing massive grounds. It is almost proverbial that the church in many places is “a mile wide but an inch deep.” Worse still, many so-called Christians are no different from the world in their core values and moral choices! (Chan 1995)

The first solution he advocates is to shift “from Exhortation to Spiritual Direction.” Chan explains that the core objective of spiritual direction is “to point a disciple of Christ towards God; and in Him, towards the right direction of life. Spiritual direction thus presents discipleship not as a program, but as a way of life” (Chan 1995).

This way of life is deeply rooted in finding a means of building a relationship with God that leads to authentic transformation. The traditional exhortations to believers are problematic because they tend to focus solely on the pragmatic. Much energy and time is devoted to imparting biblical knowledge that instructs believers on what they ought to do, like “doing devotion, trusting the Lord, having faith;” however, there is little to no endeavour to teach spiritual formation to guide believers in sustaining a vibrant life that results in real inner transformation. This is one of the main deficiencies that I have observed in Chinese evangelical churches whose approaches to discipleship are largely based on programs and events.

Chapter 3 therefore provides a holistic spiritual model that presents four types of spirituality: *cognitive spirituality*, *experiential spirituality*, *contemplative spirituality*, and *societal renewal spirituality*. This model calls for a balance between the head and the heart: both are necessary to know and experience the revealed God and the mystical God.

Chapter 4 presents the outcomes of my qualitative research report, which sought to determine the efficacy of applying the holistic spiritual model. The results affirm that group spiritual direction has helped the six participants deepen their spiritual intimacy with God and with other believers as well as their commitment to practicing the spiritual disciplines.

My entire portfolio includes the following components: my spiritual autobiography chronicles my journey toward realizing the need for authentic spiritual transformation of Christians, specifically in Chinese evangelical churches; my proposal of a holistic spiritual model, which is a solution to this problem; and finally, my research project, which reports the effectiveness of this model, specifically the fruitfulness of providing group spiritual direction. The whole process of completing this portfolio led to a profound discovery that has reshaped my view of Christian spirituality, which can be reflected in the following objectives.

First, my portfolio aims to increase the awareness that some Chinese evangelical churches, not limited to Markham and Richmond Hill, tend to focus heavily on *cognitive spirituality*, bringing about spiritual renewal through

equipping believers with biblical knowledge. In addition, they concentrate on engaging believers in ministry and mission-related activities through *societal regeneration spirituality*. It has been observed that adhering strictly to this model of discipleship has weakened the capacity for believers to build an intimate relationship with God and with other people. When spirituality lacks wholeness, ministry service and missional activities degenerate into rituals and legalistic activities. *Experiential spirituality* is therefore powerful because it seeks to apply ancient and contemporary spiritual practices—whether for the individual Christian or the church community—to help deepen the believer’s experience of God.

Second, *contemplative spirituality* focuses on the spiritual disciplines of silence, solitude, and spiritual retreats and which are considered significant catalysts for authentic spiritual transformation. The teaching of these disciplines, however, has been found lacking in the selected churches and the Chinese evangelical churches from my experiences. *Contemplative spirituality* is necessary to help believers listen to God’s leading. Data gathered from the research project showed that participants experienced greater spiritual clarity through repeated practices of silence under group spiritual direction. *Contemplative spirituality* invites us to intentionally pay attention to God in the midst of our disoriented and distracted lives. It would be especially helpful for diligent pastors and leaders in Chinese evangelical churches as it reminds them to

slow down in their busy ministry and spend quality quiet time with God. Inwardly transformed, they can serve the church with greater strength and integrity.

Third, the spiritual community model under group spiritual direction is a powerful means of facilitating soulful conversations that produce authentic fellowship. Leaders are typically trained to ask observational and interpretational questions, but they are often weak in encouraging formational and soulful sharing that reveals one's innermost struggles and spiritual experiences. This is because Chinese churches do not focus on guiding the soul and heart, but rather the mind. Perhaps the reason is that Chinese culture is very concerned about 'face' and the baring of the soul or heart does not feel natural. Yet, as a Chinese pastor, I feel that we are suffering from the consequences of these inhibitions. I once heard a believer sarcastically express that his church community was like "familiar strangers walking beside each other for over 20 years." From his statement, I suspected disappointment and discontent about the present condition of the spiritual community. Group spiritual direction offers hope for many Chinese evangelical churches struggling to build authentic spiritual community. It offers a contemplative environment that frees believers from striving to achieve only the 'practical' (i.e., solving one another's problems), and encourages them to listen to God's voice and notice His movements among them. Through silence and prayer, believers can offer spiritually-affirming and discerning words to one another.

The entire project not only nurtured a deep spiritual connection among the group members, but also cultivated their desire to deepen their experience of God.

Receiving guidance about spiritual practices under group spiritual direction and acquiring wisdom through discerning the work of the Holy Spirit, these believers testified to deeper encounters with God and a strengthened commitment to practicing the spiritual disciplines as a community.

The portfolio shows that spiritual formation calls us to grow in the likeness of Jesus Christ with all our mind, heart, soul, and strength (Mark 12:30). We are not to compartmentalize our life such that only one particular aspect is dictating it. Although I see how the spiritual model in this portfolio can be of tremendous value to many churches struggling to revive spiritually stagnant and shrinking congregations, I anticipate two possible areas of hesitation for churches.

First, interest in this topic can potentially be limited if churches associate its aims with those of the charismatic movement, a movement that emphasizes the filling of the Holy Spirit and the use of charismatic gifts, such as the speaking of tongues (Stetzer, 2013). Although I find it difficult to accept this rationale, I heard it through a comment from a deacon after I finished teaching a class in his church. During the daily examen exercise, when an individual was invited to review God's work in his life that day, by simply inviting the class to be aware of the "presence of the Holy Spirit" made them fear that I was charismatic. Participants wrongly associate any reference to the work or presence of the Holy Spirit with their reservations about the charismatic movement. However, a participant's deep sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit should bring about delight; it ought to move them to live a holy life because the work of God is real to them. Thus, this

fear can greatly limit the potential for spiritual vitality and experiences of God's power and blessing. There is a need for Chinese evangelical churches to correctly teach theology relating to the Holy Spirit and help believers fully and correctly understand the development, values, and concerns pertaining to the charismatic movement.

Second, the other area of fear that might limit the impact of this portfolio is the association of ancient spiritual practices with Catholicism. Some pastors and church leaders may associate the spiritual practices with mysticism, which Protestant churches tend to avoid. However, the ancient spiritual practices are valuable in helping Chinese evangelical churches to build a loving relationship with God. Peter Scazzero, in his recent book *Why Church History Matters*, points out three truths about church history:

1. The history of the first 1,054 years belongs to all of us: Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox believers.
2. We have so much we can learn from our brothers and sisters who are different than us.
3. We have our "dirty laundry" and blood spots (Scazzero 2017, 7-8).

Scazzero thus encourages believers to learn from the strengths of other spiritual traditions:

If we are to introduce our people to a discipleship that deeply changes lives, we must learn from Christians very different than us, from those with a long history of expertise in areas in which we as evangelicals are weak. The challenge is to do this while holding firmly to our distinct, unique strengths and contributions. (Scazzero 2017, 9)

Given the spiritual state of many believers in Chinese evangelical churches in the G.T.A, this invitation becomes all the more urgent.

If Chinese churches do not see the spiritual crisis of ill-equipped believers lacking holistic spiritual formation which is vital to their spiritual health, the church will suffer from powerless witnesses. Lacking an authentic spiritual community, these believers will wither like “dried leaves,” as self-identified by the seminary student mentioned earlier, a lack of spiritual vitality. Our missional activities only flourish when we are spiritually refreshed, which is dependent on living a spiritually contemplative life. Inaction will incur a great cost: churches will lose ground in drawing the next generation away from the postmodern world. People are yearning for authentic spiritual experiences rooted in a genuine relationship with Christ. Purely dogmatic teaching and ritualistic exhortations will drive them away.

There are few potential limitations in this portfolio. One of the weaknesses I realized about my portfolio was that I failed to incorporate the importance of adversity in spiritual formation. While reflecting upon my autobiography, I came to realize that the trials and suffering I had endured profoundly shaped and matured my faith: my father's abandoning the family, my mother's murder, Eric's suicide, my cancer, my miscarriage and my challenging experiences in ministries. These dark nights were also means of grace that God used in the maturing of my faith, the shaping of my character, and the strengthening of my spiritual formation. The other limitation is that I do not have empirical data that proves my argument about the cognitive spirituality of the Chinese churches that I interviewed, selected and served. These are only a limited number of churches in

this list. Nevertheless, the observation has been made by myself, pastors, and academics, which are mutually affirming in their diagnosis of Chinese evangelical culture.

Third, my unique background enriched my role as the leader in group spiritual direction. I brought in eighteen years of pastoral experience. I was known to the participants as a guest instructor of spiritual formation for their Sunday school class. In addition, I brought along 10 years of training in the area of Christian spirituality. Gordon Smith describes five essential qualities of a spiritual director, and one of these is knowledge of the history of Christian spirituality and the ability to draw from its wisdom. Adding to this, I brought over 13 years of experience in leading contemplative retreats as well as five years of experience as a spiritual director. After completing a recent test from CliftonStrengths, formerly Clifton StrengthsFinder (CliftonStrength 2018), I found out that my five dominant gifts are “communication,” “command,” “activator” (making things happen), “woo” (winning others over), and “strategic.” These qualities are what I brought to my role as the leader in the research group. I believe that someone with a similar background and gifting would enhance the effectiveness of leading group spiritual direction.

In sum, with the holistic spiritual model presented in this portfolio, along with the recounted experiences of the participants under group spiritual direction, it is my hope that churches in North America would be greatly inspired by it. May the model, along with all the spiritual exercises that have been provided, be a

valuable answer to our highly technological and distracted world, and may it encourage the people of God to live a missional life, one that reflects a love for God with all of one's mind, heart, soul, and strength, bringing redemptive love to all people of all nations.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Consent Form (English Version Only)

Research Subject:

Group Spiritual Direction toward Spiritual Transformation of Chinese

Evangelical Christians

Introduction:

My name is Paddy Wong and I am currently doing my Doctor of Ministry at Tyndale University and Seminary. I will be doing research on the impact of *group spiritual direction*. While many Chinese evangelical churches may be unfamiliar with the practice of group spiritual direction, over the years there has been a greater awareness of its benefits. I am inviting the six of you, former participants of my Sunday school class on Christian Spiritual Formation to participate in my research project.

Purpose of this Research Project:

Spiritual growth in Chinese evangelical churches is often nurtured through educational events, mission work, and ministry involvement. The purpose of the research project is to study whether group spiritual direction, an intentionally built community, can serve as a means of deepening the spiritual formation of evangelical Chinese Christians and enable them to experience spiritual transformation.

If the research rationale is confirmed, it is hoped that the practice of group spiritual direction will be incorporated into the discipleship program of the local church, in order to foster more holistic Christian living in its members.

Study Requirement:

This research project will involve attending a weekend retreat (Friday night to Sunday afternoon from Sept. 30th to Oct. 2nd, 2016.) and participating in a bi-weekly group spiritual direction class for six consecutive weeks from mid-September to December 2016. In each session, you will have the opportunity to practice silence and listening, reflect on Scripture, engage in conversations with those in your group, ask questions, share personal insights and use prayer to encourage one another. Additional involvement includes being interviewed twice by the researcher, once before the study and once after the study

Time Required:

Before the group spiritual direction sessions begin, you will complete a one-hour interview. At the end of all the group sessions, you will complete another one-hour interview. The weekend retreat in the fall will last three days and two nights and will take place at the Home of Bethany retreat center located in Sunderland.

Participant Selection:

You are invited to participate in this research project because of your attendance in the Christian Spiritual Formation Sunday school class. Having been a student of this class, you have already demonstrated your interest in participating in group spiritual direction sessions and have developed a better understanding of spirituality.

Voluntary Participation and Requirement:

Your participation in this research project is *entirely voluntary*. If you choose to participate, you must have NEVER attended any retreat led by the researcher (Paddy Wong) nor have attended any former group spiritual direction sessions. This must be entirely new for you.

Procedures:

At the retreat, you will be guided to practice spiritual exercises (you were introduced to many of these in the Sunday school class). These will include *lectio divina* (a process involving four steps of engaging the Bible: reading, meditating, praying and contemplating), prayer walks, silence, meditation, reading, reflecting, journaling, and group sharing. Group spiritual direction sessions will begin with a centering exercise, involving reading Scripture, praying, gazing at an image for meditation, listening to a prayer, contemplating gospel truths, and/or *lectio divina*. I will lead the group with a spiritual exercise for 5 to 10 minutes, during which participants will learn to listen to God's voice as they reflect on the message taught in the session. After this time of silence, each participant will take turns asking a question or sharing a struggle or joyful encounter that came to them during the spiritually-guided exercise. After one person shares, the group will pause in silence for one minute, listening for the prayer that God has for this person, and then the group will respond and pray together for this person. The next person then continues in the same way until the final person has done so. A participant observer will be invited to observe and take notes for data collection and analysis.

Duration:

This research project will take place over a three-month period, from mid-September (beginning with the first interview) until mid-December 2016 (concluding with a follow-up session and second interview). In addition to the sessions stated above, there will be an additional 1-2 sessions in January and February 2017 for the presentation of the results found during the course of this

research project (participation is voluntary). The group spiritual direction sessions will take place at either your church or my home in Markham.

Risks:

There are no foreseeable risks in the participation of both the retreat and group sessions. However, the participant may possibly feel some stress due to the degree of commitment required by the project and the reality that one participates in a research study. You are encouraged to contact your pastor, Rev. Dr. Kelvin Luong or Rev. Felix Wong when such stresses are experienced.

Benefits:

If you choose to participate in this research project:

1. You will have the opportunity to attend a retreat free of tuition (except for fees for accommodation and meals).
2. You will have the opportunity to be guided by an experienced spiritual director in six group spiritual direction sessions, which aim to deepen your spiritual intimacy with God (free of tuition).
3. You will have the opportunity to engage in spiritual conversations in a group setting, enabling you to form deeper bonds with sisters/brothers in Christ from your church.
4. People around you will benefit from your spiritual learning as you pass on your knowledge and experiences.

Confidentiality and Anonymity:

The identity of participants will be kept strictly confidential. Documents relating to the participant will be identified by numeric code and will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. The name of the participant will not be used in any report in this research project but shall be referred to as, for example, "Participant A", or with a fake name. Information gathered through questionnaires, interviews, and documented group sessions will be analyzed and interpreted where it is relevant to the research project. The analysis and interpretation data will be stored in a computer that is password-protected. Upon completion and grading of the research project, all raw data gathered shall be destroyed. The analytical/interpretive data will be retained but this does not use any actual names of the participants. Throughout the sessions, participants will be firmly reminded of the need to respect one another's privacy and to refrain from sharing any content emerging from the meetings outside of the group sessions. This assurance of this final stipulation will be based on the mutual trust fostered during the group meeting sessions.

Sharing of Results:

The gathered data as well as the analytical/interpretive data emerging from this qualitative research project will be shared with you. Each participant shall obtain a copy of the results. In addition, there will be a meeting in which the results will be shared with the congregation/ministry board at Toronto Simpson Chinese Alliance Church/Hallelujah Chinese Evangelical Free Church. Finally, the results will be published for other interested parties to review, and a copy of the findings of this research project will be available at the Tyndale Library.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw:

You do not have to participate in this research project if you do not wish to do so. If you do choose to participate, you can decide to withdraw at any point in time throughout the duration of the research project. There will be no consequences for doing so.

Right to Contact Researcher:

If you have any further questions or inquiries regarding this research project, please feel free to contact me via email glorybluelight@gmail.com or phone (416) 627-2487. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you can contact my project supervisor Dr. Mark Chapman via email mchapman@tyndale.ca, the Director of Doctor of Ministry Dr. Paul Bramer via email pbramer@tyndale.ca, or Tyndale Research Ethics Board via email reb@tyndale.ca.

I have read the above Letter of Information outlining the purpose and details of this research project. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it, and any question I have asked has been answered to my satisfaction. I consent, voluntarily, to participate in this study. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights by participating in this study.

Name in Full: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____
Date/Month/Year

Appendix B: Consent Form for Interviewing Pastors (English Version Only)

Research Subject:

A Holistic Spiritual Formation Model for the Selected Chinese Evangelical
Churches in the G.T.A.

Introduction:

My name is Paddy Wong and I am currently doing my Doctor of Ministry at Tyndale University College & Seminary. I will be doing research on the spiritual model of the Chinese evangelical churches (Cantonese speaking) in the G.T.A. I am inviting you, as a pastor serving in the G.T.A to participate in my research project. My Questions is: *What are your observations of the spiritual health and spiritual growth model of your church and of churches as a whole among the Cantonese-speaking Chinese churches in the G.T.A.?*

Purpose of this Research Project:

Spiritual growth in Chinese evangelical churches is often nurtured through educational events, mission work, and ministry involvement. The purpose of the research project is to study whether group spiritual direction, an intentionally built community, can serve as a means of deepening the spiritual formation of evangelical Chinese Christians and enable them to experience spiritual transformation. If the research rationale is confirmed, it is hoped that the practice of group spiritual direction will be incorporated into the discipleship program of the local church, in order to foster more holistic Christian living in its members.

Study Requirement:

This research project will involve accepting interview, reviewing and reflecting your personal observation of your pastoral experience in your local church or your observations of the Chinese churches in the G.T.A. as a whole. I am requesting that you allow me to use the content of the interview that I previously conducted for my Doctor of Ministry Research Portfolio.

Time Required:

One to one and a half hour (already completed).

Participant Selection:

You are invited to participate in this research project because of your experiences in serving the Chinese evangelical churches in the G.T.A.

Voluntary Participation and Requirement:

Your participation in this research project is *entirely voluntary*. If you choose to participate, you must have experience in serving an evangelical Chinese church in the G.T.A.

Procedures:

Respond to my questions: *What are your observations of the spiritual health and spiritual growth model of your church and of churches as a whole among the Cantonese-speaking Chinese churches in the G.T.A.?*

Duration:

The interview took place in a coffee shop or at your church.

Risks:

There are no foreseeable risks in the participation of this interview.

Confidentiality and Anonymity:

There will be NO confidentiality and anonymity in the content that you have shared with me. Your name and the name of your church will be mentioned in my portfolio.

Sharing of Results:

The gathered data as well as the analytical/interpretive data emerging from this research project will be shared with you, either through a personal meeting or through a public gathering. Finally, the results will be published for other interested parties to review, and a copy of the findings of this research project will be available at the Tyndale Library.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw:

You do not have to participate in this research project. If you do choose to participate, you can decide to withdraw at any point in time throughout the interview. There will be no consequences for withdrawing.

Right to Contact Researcher:

If you have any further questions or inquiries regarding this research project, please feel free to contact me via email glorybluelight@gmail.com or phone (416) 627-2487. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you can contact my project supervisor and Director of Doctor of Ministry Dr. Mark Chapman via email mchapman@tyndale.ca, or the Tyndale Research Ethics Board via email reb@tyndale.ca.

I have read the above Letter of Information outlining the purpose and details of this research project. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it, and any

question I have asked has been answered to my satisfaction. I consent, voluntarily, to participate in this study. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights by participating in this study.

Name in Full: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____
Date/Month/Year

Appendix C: A Research Instrument:

Questions for Pre-Intervention Interview

1. Please describe your relationship with God in the last three months.
2. How did your relationship with God affect your relationship with other believers in the past three months?
3. In the past three months, did you have any regular spiritual practices (e.g. times for prayer, silence, solitude, meditation, devotion and retreat)?

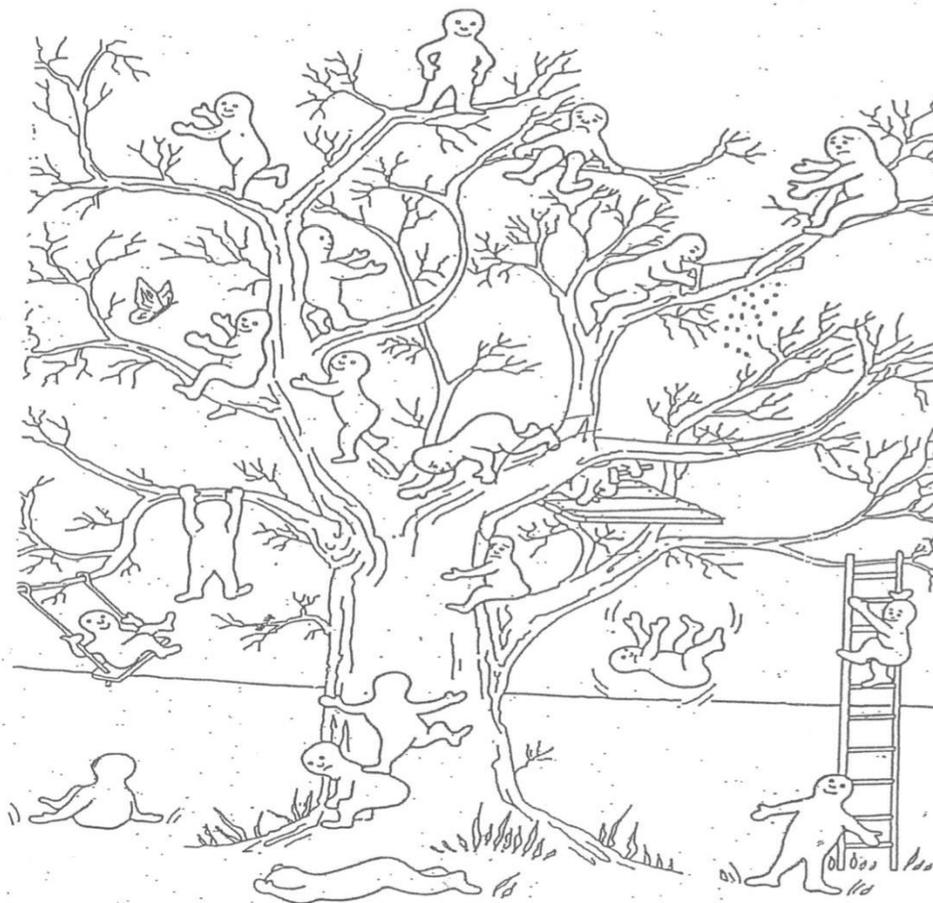
Evaluation Form for Interview after the Six Group Sessions

1. Please describe your relationship with God in the last three months. Has your relationship been affected by the group spiritual directions sessions? If so, how?
2. Do you sense that your participation in group spiritual direction has affected your relationships with other believers? If so, how?
3. Has your participation in group spiritual direction impacted your commitment to practicing the spiritual disciplines in your Christian life? If so, in what way or to what extent?
4. What are other comments that you would like to make regarding your participation in this entire study, including the retreat and six group sessions?

Appendix D: Six Centering Exercises Used for the Six Group Spiritual Direction Sessions

Session 1: Tree and People Image (Source: Handout from St. John Convent Retreat, Unknown source)

Instructions: Invite participants to identify which person's position or movement they most identify with. Allow a few minutes to look at the image, and follow with sharing by each person.



**Session 2: Psalm 23. Pastor D.A Waite Lists
Seventeen Promises in Psalm 23 (NKJV)**

Instructions:

Steps 1: Read each verse and follow with the promises (e.g. The Lord is my shepherd promises. A shepherding relationship)

Step 2: After each of the nineteen verse-promise pairs below have been read, the leader asks, “Is there a promise, or two, that particularly speaks to or touches you?”

Step 3: Give each participant a turn to share their experience.

| Bible Verse | Promises |
|---|----------------------------|
| 1a. The Lord <i>is</i> my shepherd | A shepherding relationship |
| 1b. I shall not want. | Supply of our needs |
| 2a. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; | Rest |
| 2b. He leads me beside the still waters | Refreshment |
| 3a. He restores my soul; | Healing |
| 3b. He leads me in the paths of righteousness | Guidance |
| 3c. For His name’s sake.- | Purpose |
| 4a. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, | Testing |
| 4b. I will fear no evil; | Protection |
| 4c. For You <i>are</i> with me; | Faithfulness of Presence |
| 4d. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me | Discipline |
| 5a. You prepare a table before me | Provision |
| 5b. in the presence of my enemies; | Hope |
| 5c. You anoint my head with oil; | Consecration. |
| 5d. My cup runs over | Abundance. |
| 6a. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me. | God’s constant love |
| 6b. All the days of my life; | Blessing |
| 6c. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord | Security |
| 6d. Forever | Eternity |

Session 3: The Father's Love Letter (with background music from Beloved: Songs from the River Vol. 2, Ruth Fazal)

Steps 1: Read the Father's Love Letter with the music playing in the background
<http://www.fathersloveletter.com/media-center.html>

Step 2: Ask, "Is there is a message or a few messages that our Father impressing upon you?"

Session: 4 The Daily Examen: Prayerfully Reviewing Your Day

- (1) Stillness: Recalling God's presence
- (2) Gratitude: Expressing thankfulness
- (3) Reflection: Looking back on your day
- (4) Sorrow: Asking for forgiveness
- (5) Hopefulness: Resolving to grow

<http://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/prayer/personal-prayer-life/different-ways-to-pray/prayerfully-reviewing-your-day-daily-examen?p=1>

Session 5: Art: *Come to Me* by David Lindsley

Read Matthew 11:28-30 (Read New Living Translation and then The Message) while meditating on the image, "Come to Me" by David Lindsley.

Session 6: Ritual of Relinquishment and Discernment Card

Step 1: Ritual of relinquishment: Ask participants to put pebbles into their hand. These pebbles represent the things God wants them to let go. Place the hand with pebbles inside a bowl of water.

Step 2: Discernment Card (Available at Loyola House, Guelph, Ontario)
Give participants 10-15 cards, and invite them to use a few cards as stories depicting their group spiritual direction journey.

Appendix E: Exercise for Lectio Divina (Matthew: 6:24-34)

Step one: (Read): Read the passage slowly. Listen reflectively with your heart. Ask: “What word, sentence, or phrase touches me?”

Step two: (Meditate): Read the passage again. Meditate reflectively on the words of God. Pay attention to what touches you and speaks to your heart. Allow one to two minutes of silence and ruminate on it. Repeat the word, or words. Allow the passage to settle within, “creatively exploring the connections between text and life” (Wilhoit and Howard 2012, 85).

Step three (Pray): Read the passage a third time. Again, continue to listen to that word, sentence, or phrase that has touched you. How it has touched you may be evolving. Be sensitive to the voice and invitation of the Spirit, for you may “sense a touch of healing...hear God’s voice of love...[be] shaken, [or] challenged by what [you] [have] read” (Wilhoit and Howard 2012, 99). Respond in prayer inspired by your meditation on the text.

Step four (Rest): Try to “rest” in God. “Simply ‘be with’ God’s presence as you open yourself to a deeper hearing of the Word of God” (Contemplative Outreach, 2). Allow a few minutes of silence.

Contemplation/rest in God in the daily life: After this moment’s rest, create an image in your mind of the text you read, and use this image (such as a well-fed bird, or a blooming flower) while going through your activities today. Continue to reflect on, pray over and rest in it during all the activities of your day and be mindful of God’s work in each of your movements and events.

**Appendix F: Applications for Living the Holistic
Spiritual Formation Model for Chinese
Evangelical Church:**

1. Teach the holistic spiritual formation model in Sunday school/on weekly evenings, once to twice a year, to give an overview of healthy and balance spiritual practices.

Table 16. Curriculum of a Holistic Spiritual Formation Model for 18-20 weeks

| Lessons | Topics |
|---------|--|
| I. | Introduction: Basic Questions and Definitions of Spiritual Formation |
| II. | A Model of Spiritual Formation |
| III. | Lectio Divina |
| IV. | Time with Abba |
| V. | Discernment I: Listening to God's Voice |
| VI. | Discernment II: Listening to God's Voice |
| VII. | Silence & Solitude |
| VIII. | Contemplative Retreat |
| IX. | Life Review I |
| X. | Life Review II: Group Sharing |
| XI. | True Self vs. False Self |
| XII. | Rule of Life I |
| XIII. | Rule of Life II: Exercise |
| XIV. | The Practice of Daily Examine |
| XV. | Discipline of Simplicity |
| XVI. | Discipline of Social Engagement |
| XVII. | Discipline of Spiritual Direction & Group Spiritual Direction |
| XVIII. | The Practice of Centering Prayer |
| XIX. | Discipline of Fasting |
| XX. | Discipline of Sabbath |
| XXI. | Question and Answer and Reflections |

2. Host “Life Transformational Groups”: Meet 4-6 sessions. Introduce and teach the deepening of various spiritual practices: *lectio divina*, gospel contemplation, “Time with Abba”, rule of life, group spiritual direction and life review.
3. Create space of silence before, during or at the end of meetings, group sessions and times of worship.
4. Encourage church members to create space for and a rhythm of silence and solitude, on a regular and daily basis, by crafting a rule of life based on the individuals’ own desires and ability to maintain the rule.
5. Teach and encourage the use of “liturgy of the hour” as an alternative approach to prayer
6. Create teaching platforms to introduce spiritual classics, such as *Spiritual Classic: Selected Readings on the Twelve Spiritual Disciplines* by Richard Foster
7. Host regular half day, one day, overnight or weekend contemplative retreats as a church rule of life. Different duration of contemplative retreats helps to accommodate people with different capacities to take part.
8. Teach, model and encourage the practice of Sabbath as a church culture. Avoid meetings on Sundays.
9. Encourage gifted individuals to be trained as lay spiritual directors to accompany those who desire to become aware of God’s activities in one’s life.
10. Adopt the rhythm of the liturgical church calendar, such as Lent and Advent, rather than following the culture (Scazzero 2006, 46).
11. Partner with organizations and support members to seek spiritual help from qualified and experienced spiritual directors.
12. Hire spiritual direction pastors to nurture leaders and the congregation. Adele Colhoun, the author of *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, was recently hired (Jan 2017) as the spiritual formation pastor to nurture the soul of nine young pastors and leaders in the congregation of Highrock, Arlington. It took the courage and conviction of a leadership team to believe in the value of investing in the spiritual lives of church leadership.

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